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## The Tragedy of Offensive Realism: Testing Aggressive Power Politics Models

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## The Tragedy of Offensive Realism: Testing Aggressive Power Politics Models

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*Offensive realism is a theory of opportunistic state power maximization. States are said to always seek power so that they may dominate the international system and survive under conditions of anarchy. The theory of offensive realism is both descriptive in the sense that it suggests how states have acted in the past and prescriptive in that it suggests how states should conduct foreign policy. What remains is to empirically test the propositions that offensive realism advocates. Under such testing, we argue that offensive realism fails to accurately explain the “tragedy of great power politics.” We find that two opposing theories, one norm-based and one issue-based, perform better than offensive realism in describing the actions of major powers. If the theory fails to accurately explain past historical events, it is of little use for guiding future actions and policy.*

**KEYWORDS** *offensive realism, power politics, rivalry, issues, norms*

Realism remains the dominant paradigm of international relations theory.<sup>1</sup> The tenets of realism include the notions that states seek power to survive, major powers dominate the international system, and the international system is anarchic. John Mearsheimer (2001) follows Morgenthau (1948) and Waltz

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(1979) in adding to the canon of realist thought in international relations theory by proposing a theory of offensive realism based on the structural conditions of the system and the offensive nature of state action. If major powers are assumed to seek more than survival they should seek to thrive in the international system.

Offensive realism is a theory of opportunistic state power maximization. States always seek power so that they may ensure their state's security under conditions of anarchy in the international system. The theory of offensive realism is both descriptive in that it describes how states have acted in the past and prescriptive in that it suggests how states should conduct foreign policy. What remains is to empirically test the propositions that offensive realism proposes. The goal of this effort is not to falsify the predictions of offensive realism, but to investigate its empirical accuracy and suggest future research directions. A theory is of little use if it fails to adequately explain real world events both in the present and in the past. Offensive realism should be put to a test by comparing it to the history of major state action from 1816 to 1992. While case studies are useful in explaining events and suggesting new theoretical innovations, a large-N test of Mearsheimer's (2001) theory is needed to investigate its validity and degree of explanatory power.

This paper will seek to test the notion that states are constantly engaged in an unrelenting pursuit of power. Ultimately, the study conducted here finds evidence that offensive realism fails to accurately explain the actions of great powers. The theory clearly contains more "anomalies" than Mearsheimer (2001, p. 10) is willing to concede. Additionally, according to these findings, it appears that two opposing theories, one norm-based and one issue-based, perform significantly better than offensive realism in explaining the actions of major powers. To more accurately explain the actions of major powers, offensive realism needs to be reevaluated so that the predictions correspond with the historical record.

## MEARSHEIMER'S THEORY OF OFFENSIVE REALISM

John Mearsheimer (1990; 1995; 2001) has been the main proponent of the emerging offensive realist theory.<sup>2</sup> Mearsheimer (2001, p. 54) asserts that states have a will to power in that they do not merely seek to survive, but to thrive in the international system constrained by anarchy; namely the goal is to maximize their share of world power due to structural motivations. "This unrelenting pursuit of power means that great powers are inclined to look for opportunities to alter the distribution of world power in their favor . . . simply put, great powers are primed for offense." (Mearsheimer, 2001, p. 3) An "unrelenting pursuit of power" suggests that great powers are constantly

seeking to alter the distribution of power in their favor. There can be no mistake in the wording; power is a constant goal for those states that wish to survive in an anarchic system.

Offensive realism focuses on the actions of great powers, and the ultimate aim of a great power is to become a hegemon.<sup>3</sup> Becoming a global hegemon and dominating the international balance of power is the only way states can ensure their survival in an anarchic environment.<sup>4</sup> Mearsheimer believes that since no state is likely to attain global hegemony, the world is condemned to great power competition and war.

To become a hegemon, a state must meet three conditions: it must become a regional hegemon, acquire wealth and land power, and develop nuclear weapons. Each of these represents a step toward power, and power is primarily achieved through war, blackmail, bait and bleed strategies, and bloodletting. As in all realist theoretical work, power is the key variable that determines state action, where the goal is to gain power, not to distribute it equally (Waltz, 1979). Thus, balance of power is not the optimal outcome since states will always seek to gain more power and offset the balance.

Mearsheimer paints the international system as a bleak world filled with states constantly seeking hegemony, a status they cannot acquire.<sup>5</sup> This perpetual movement toward hegemonic ambition ultimately leads states to enter into war. He argues that the pursuit of power will cease only when hegemony is achieved, which is impossible in the current system (Mearsheimer, 2001, p. 34).

### THREE TENETS OF OFFENSIVE REALISM

1. Goal is to maximize share of world power.
2. Ultimate aim is to become the hegemon.
3. Since global hegemony is impossible, the world is condemned to perpetual great power competition.

Offensive realism suggests that major powers are continuously seeking power. The causal mechanism for this action is the lack of a central authority.<sup>6</sup> The ultimate goal of a state is to prevent state failure, and the only way to do this is through power maximization. Mearsheimer argues that when states have offensive capabilities, they are likely to use them. States can never be certain of other states' intentions. If a state has the capabilities to assert its dominance on the international system, it will do so merely because it has the means (weapons) and the will (survival). Satisfaction plays no part in conflictual interactions.<sup>7</sup> Rather, all that matters for an offensive realist is that states have the power to change the status quo and seek to do so regardless of other conditions.

It would be useful to make clear the distinctions between offensive realism on one hand, and prudential (Morgenthau, 1948) and structural realism (Waltz, 1979) on the other. Mearsheimer's theory differs from Morgenthau's (1948) in that the structure of the system leads states to seek power. Mearsheimer also believes that conflict is not hardwired into the human brain. It is merely a result of the absence of security and hegemony. Morgenthau advocates a more prudent version of offensive action; only when the national interest of a state is threatened should a state take action. Mearsheimer's version of realism, in contrast, purports that a state seeks hegemony even before the national interest of that state is threatened (pre-emption). Mearsheimer differs from Waltz (1979) in his proposition that states do not seek to maintain a balance of power, but to acquire hegemony. For offensive realists, state survival dictates that they seek to acquire more power whenever the opportunity arises. "If they want to survive, great powers should always act like good offensive realists." (Mearsheimer, 2001, p. 12) Survival is not achieved through balancing, but in the maximization of state power.

To gain power, states must pursue a variety of strategies aimed at increasing their position in the system (Mearsheimer, 2001, p. 13). The main strategy to gain power is through blackmail and war. Specifically, states use threats or force to acquire goods they seek to control. War can be used to decrease the security of another state and therefore increase the security of the aggressor state if gains are considered absolute. Mearsheimer (2001, p. 139) also suggests that states can undertake strategies of bloodletting and bait and bleed. Causing losses in another state can only increase security of the state taking threatening actions. Finally, states use both balancing and buck-passing strategies to maintain their power.

What remains is to examine the logic of the theory and to test its empirical accuracy against a large number of cases. The next section of this article considers the various conditions of offensive action and tests their empirical accuracy using data from states at dispute between 1816 to 1992.

## RECONSIDERING OFFENSIVE REALISM

In this section of the paper, we will outline how offensive realism can be tested as an empirical theory. First, we must ask if the theory is empirically accurate based on the conditions laid out by the theory and those conditions that can be logically derived from the theory. Next, the propositions that great powers are addicted to conflict and are the most important actors in the system will be discussed. Finally, offensive realism is put to a head-to-head test against two opposing theories that predict different paths of action for great powers. If offensive realism cannot stand up to empirical testing according to the conditions discussed here and if it cannot surpass

other opposing explanations that better identify the conditions for great power action, the theory is in need of reevaluation. In fact, other realist scholars (James, 2009) have begun an effort to question the micro-foundations of the theory. We go further here in that we question the empirical foundations of the theory in addition to its theoretical foundations.

### Is Offensive Realism Empirically Accurate?

Mearsheimer (2001, p. 232) finds that “the nuclear arms race between the superpowers and the foreign policy behavior of Japan (1868–1945), Germany (1862–1945), the Soviet Union (1917–1991), and Italy (1861–1943) show that great powers look for opportunities to shift the balance of power in their favor and usually seize opportunities when they appear.” Labs (1997) finds similar support for offensive realism in four case studies.

Lemke (2004) puts Mearsheimer’s variant of offensive realism to a head-to-head test against power transition theory (Organski, 1958; Organski and Kugler, 1980; Kugler and Organski, 1989; Kugler and Lemke, 1996). Power transition theory asserts that states come into conflict when they approach approximate power parity and are dissatisfied powers.<sup>8</sup> Evaluating the performance of offensive realism and power transition theory in the post-Cold War era, Lemke (2004) finds “that offensive realism is largely inconsistent with what the great powers have done in the past decade or so.” In short, offensive realism fails to stand up to a test of its recent empirical record when compared to power transition theory.

We test the empirical accuracy of offensive realism using conflict data from 1816 to 1992 and by comparing it to other theories, namely the territorial explanation of war (Vasquez, 1993) and a norms-based perspective (Wallensteen, 1984). Mearsheimer (2001, p. 54) himself concedes there will be inconsistencies and anomalies in the theory, yet these problems are much more persistent than he claims. If offensive realism is to be considered a useful theory to guide action, it must be able to stand on its own when tested independently, as well as be able to beat rival explanations when put in a head-to-head test. The theory is of little value if it passes neither test.

Of course all theories have difficulties explaining all cases, but this theory seems to explain very few examples in the empirical record. Elman (2004) finds that the theory needs to be extended and stretched to consider the domestic and regional motivations of a state’s external action. This reformulation of the theory limits its original intent since the entire point of the theory seems to be to point out the strength of a structural-based approach. Caveats are laced throughout the theory and book. Mearsheimer suggests that failing to act like an offensive realist means the state has acted “foolishly,” not that the theory has failed to predict action. This is an inadequate explanation for the failure of the theory to predict action, as is the

suggestion that other “fine grained theories” can supplement the theory where it fails. The goal of this effort is not to falsify offensive realism, but to evaluate the empirical accuracy of offensive realism and suggest some opposing theoretical explanations that better explain the behavior of great powers in the system. If the theory fails consistently, there is little that can be done to supplement or reformulate the theory since at that point it becomes degenerative and exhibits the traits of a theory saving enterprise (Vasquez, 1997).

### Are Great Powers the Only Important Actors?

According to offensive realism, the most important states in the system are the great powers.<sup>9</sup> It may also be suggested that the opposite may be true. Minor powers could be just as conflict prone as great powers. The conflictual behavior of minor powers could also support Mearsheimer’s theory in that it is much more elegant than originally proposed since it contains excess empirical content. However, minor powers do not (and cannot) seek global or regional hegemony, which is key for the theory. Minor powers do not take actions in relation to power concerns, but mainly in relation to issue concerns such as the stability of borders, the flow of refugees, or resource allocation. It would be useful to investigate the empirical validity of the claim that major powers always seek power in international relations when compared to the actions of minor powers, who seem to be historical bystanders in the theoretical story.

Previously, the investigation of the relationship between arms races and war was limited to the class of major power states that participated in arms races (Wallace, 1979; Diehl, 1983; Sample, 1996; Sample, 1997; Sample, 1998; Sample, 2000). Using a new dataset that includes minor and major powers, Sample (2002) finds that even minor powers get into arms races and the effect on the escalation to war is similar to the relationship between major powers and war. Sample notes, “We have been mistaken in simply assuming that major states represent the whole system.” (2002, p. 670)

Some might contend that Mearsheimer’s theory has nothing to do with the actions of minor powers; their actions should be of little consequence to any evaluation of the theory. As one respondent put it, “it does not matter if minor powers are more or less conflict prone because their wars have relatively little impact on the international order.” We assert that minor powers are important actors in the international system and their actions are relevant for the international order. From the start of World War I, where the local conflict between Serbia and Austria-Hungary spiraled into a global war, to the United States’ recent conflicts with minor powers (Iraq and Afghanistan), it is clear that minor powers are important actors in the system and conflict with them can interrupt the international order. Furthermore,

any theory that attempts to explain the actions of major powers cannot do so without accounting for the actions of major powers toward minor powers. Explaining major power actions toward other major powers might be a useful exercise, but state interactions are made up of more than dual major power incidents.

### Addiction to Conflict

Mearsheimer (2001, p. 3) suggests that states act aggressively because they have the means and the will to change their status in the international system. The “means” to change a state’s situation are military weapons. Mearsheimer believes that great powers are addicted to conflict. Here we will test this proposition to see exactly how addicted great powers are to conflict. Are they really as conflict prone as Mearsheimer suggests? Does simply having offensive weapons ensure that states will participate in deadly conflict?

To test this proposition, a simple comparison will be made. We measure the rate of conflict for major powers when compared to minor powers in the system. According to Mearsheimer, major powers should always seek to ensure their survival through offensive action. Is there a substantial difference between the conflict rates of major powers and minor powers? It might also be useful to see if the theory applies to different types of governments or regime types. Are major power democracies more conflict prone than major power autocracies? According to Mearsheimer, there should be no difference in the rates of conflict between the two regimes since all major powers are assumed to act alike in the system.

### Rival Explanations: When Is Offensive Action Likely?

How powerful is Mearsheimer’s theory of offensive realism under empirical testing? Offensive action may be a result of certain situations or other variables that would collude with state behavior to increase the probability of a state taking offensive action. There are a few clues as to when this might be the case. This article puts offensive realism up against a theory of norms and territoriality as explanations for conflict involvement.<sup>10</sup> This is not to suggest that these theories solve the puzzle of great power action; only that other, alternative theories might perform better than offensive realism when compared head to head. We employ other nonrealist theories to see if they can account for state action. The other theories identified here directly contradict offensive realism and thus would pose a theoretical problem for the theory if they were found to have express empirical content when compared to the predictions of Mearsheimer (2001). All theories suggest sufficient conditions of offensive action but the norms and territorial theories define different domains of operation when compared to offensive

theories. Scholars need to consider the scope and domain of their theories (Vasquez and Valeriano, 2009). Since territorial (dyadic)-and norms (systemic)-based theories attempt to explain conflict for all states in the international system (not just the major powers), it could be said that they are less likely to be able to predict the actions of major powers and thus should not be likely to survive a head-to-head test. Some may say it is unfair to put offensive realism to a direct test, but a useful and progressive theory would explain more than any other theory under investigation (Lakatos, 1970). The usefulness of offensive realism is called into question if it fails in any head-to-head test.

### Wallensteen's Periods of Peace

Wallensteen (1984) considers that norms in the system may have an important impact on conflict involvement. He finds that there are periods in which the rules of games are not established and states rely on unilateral actions. He calls this period "particularist." He also considers a period in which states attempt to implement a set of rules to guide their interactions. This is a "universalist" period. Wallensteen (1984) relied on historians "judgments of historical time periods" to categorize these periods.<sup>11</sup> Table 1 lists the time periods and corresponding names if given.

States rarely become involved in major power wars if the norms in the system are guided by a set of rules. An example of this type of period is the Concert of Europe era, when major powers avoided war for over 50 years. Wallensteen's (1984) study shows that when the rules of the game in the system are not agreed upon, states are more likely to enter into conflict. This may be particularly true of major powers; they may only act offensively during particularistic periods. It may not be the case that states always act in a power politics fashion, but only when the system does not constrain the actions a state can take. In these instances states may be provoked into

**TABLE 1** 1816–1976

Classification	Historical label	Time period	No. of years
Universalist	Concert of Europe	1816–1848	33
Particularist		1849–1870	22
Universalist	Bismarck's order	1871–1895	25
Particularist		1896–1918	23
Universalist	League of Nations	1919–1932	14
Particularist		1933–1944	12
Particularist	Cold War	1945–1962	18
Universalist	Détente	1963–1976	14

(Wallensteen 1984).

taking offensive action as Mearsheimer recommends. There may in fact be no “tragedy of great power politics” during universalist time periods.

### Territorial Explanation of Conflict

What Mearsheimer fails to develop are the issues behind wars and conflict. “Great powers that have no reason to fight each other—they are merely concerned with their own survival—nevertheless have little choice but to pursue power and to seek to dominate the other states in the system.” (2001, p. 3) In his theory, issues do not account for war between dyads in offensive realism. There is a constant will for states to seek power through war, regardless of the issue at stake. Territorial, regime, and policy type disputes should not be more likely to go to war than the mean probability of war for all types of disputes.

Not all major powers seek hegemony, and not all major powers fight over global-strategic issues.<sup>12</sup> Utilizing an aggressive realist theory leads one to overlook the issues at stake between a particular pair of states and also the institutional constraints and characteristics of individual states that influence state action.

Interstate war almost always results from a dispute over an issue at stake between a dyad. The trigger to wars is not the underlying structural forces, alliance dynamics, or arms race patterns, but the issue over which two states disagree. Mansbach and Vasquez (1981) conceive of an issue-based approach to world politics in which it is not important where values are allocated, but rather what values entities fight over.

Key to finding the cause of any war is investigating what the dyad is fighting over. Territorial issues are the most common cause of war (Holsti, 1991; Vasquez, 1993; Vasquez and Henehan, 2001).<sup>13</sup> Furthermore, territorial disputes have the most salience for either member of the disputing party and are least likely to be easily divisible. Hensel suggests that “territory is often seen as highly salient for three reasons: its tangible contents or attributes, its intangible or psychological value, and its effects on a state’s reputation.” (Hensel, 2000, p. 58) Territoriality is important in that states fight over territorial issues, not just because they are neighbors and constantly interact, but because “the territorial explanation of war assumes that human territoriality is a key to understanding much of interstate conflict and war in the modern global system.” (Senese and Vasquez, 2003, p. 3)

It may be the case that states tend to act in an offensive fashion when threatened with a territorial dispute by another state. Territorial disputes are the most war-prone type of conflict (Vasquez and Henehan, 2001). Thus, states could act offensively only in the face of an impending territorial claim. This outcome, however, is not predicted in offensive realist theory since issues do play a part in the decision to use force.

Of course territorial integrity is a key part of the national interest of a state (Morgenthau, 1948). Here we do not argue that states fight to defend their territory, but that issues of a territorial nature are the most conflict-prone. States will fight over territorial issues, but not because of the unremitting pursuit of power. The salience of territorial issues is what makes them so deadly for a pair of states. Territorial claims even extend beyond where the “stopping power of water” (Mearsheimer, 2001, p. 44) should restrict conflict between states.

If either of these hypotheses (territoriality or norms-based) are correct, then the theory of offensive realism would need reevaluation. One theory (norms) challenges that the idea conflict is constant in the system, and the other (territorial) suggests that conflict only results when certain issues are under contention. It then may be suggested that it is not inherent in the nature of states acting in an anarchic system to act offensively; rather that states act offensively only if they are not constrained by norms in the system or if they are in the midst of a territorial dispute. Offensive realism would then require a territorial dispute or a system of loose norms as a necessary condition. In the absence of these factors, offensive realism does not adequately hold true. If these factors—loose norms in the system and territorial issues—are necessary conditions for offensive action, each would represent a better predictor of when states will use offensive force. More viable options against which to test offensive realism may exist, but the goal here is to only show that some other theories can better explain offensive action than a lust for hegemonic standing.

## HYPOTHESIS AND RESEARCH DESIGN

Falsifiability is an important requirement of social science research. While a theory should not immediately be rejected once it is falsified, it does call into question the whole enterprise. The problem with offensive realism is that the theory does not lend itself to immediate testing. Lemke (2004) notes that “it is so vaguely stated that history could always be re-interpreted as consistent with it.” Some may disagree with our interpretations of Mearsheimer’s arguments, but the theory is not logically consistent in many places. In seeking a complete explanation of offensive action, Mearsheimer, at many points, allows for caveats that could counter his original claims. Lee (2003) points out that much like Waltz’s (1979) structural realism, the theory of offensive realism does not specify time horizons, thereby potentially leading to indefinite predictions. Scholars are still waiting for states to balance in the post-Cold War world; will we end up waiting for states to drive toward hegemony in the distant future?

We first seek to make the theory stand up on its own merit. Mearsheimer (2001) may present an elegant and parsimonious theory, but is it empirically

accurate? He writes, “although it is depressing to realize that great powers might think and act this way, it behooves us to see the world as it is, not as we would like it to be.” (Mearsheimer, 2001, p. 4) Are the great powers in the system really offensive realists at heart?

### Seeking Power

Mearsheimer (2001, p. 13) proposes a variety of ways a state might seek power. States use bloodletting, bait and bleed strategies, war, and blackmail to acquire power. Each of these terms could be considered a threat to use force or an actual use of force as measured by the Correlates of War Interstate Militarized Dispute dataset (Gochman and Maoz, 1984; Jones, Bremer et al., 1996). Each involves either threatening action (blackmail) or offensive options (bait and bleed, war, and bloodletting) that are measured through the use of force. The question then becomes a matter of how often major powers use threatening actions to acquire power.

To investigate the claim of offensive action, we can look at the rate of conflict for major and minor powers.<sup>14</sup> Major powers should use force often and repeatedly.<sup>15</sup> It is difficult to be sure what “often” can be quantified as, but major powers should at least use the threat of force more often than minor powers.

*H1: Major powers should use force more often and at a greater hostility level than minor powers do in any given year.*

Offensive realism makes no distinction between democratic conflict actions and nondemocratic conflict action since regime type does not matter. It should then be clear that pairs of democratic states use offensive action at the same rate as nondemocratic dyads. Testing this prediction by comparing the rate of conflict between dyadic democracies and nondemocracies would be useful. Offensive realism would predict a non-liberal outcome of constant conflict for both dyadic democratic and nondemocratic states. Nondemocratic pairs of states should not become involved in more conflict than democratic pairs of states.

*H2: The rate of conflict in democratic major power status dyads should be equal to or comparable to the rate of conflict for autocratic major power status dyads.*

Offensive states pursue a variety of strategies to gain power. The foremost of all is war and conflict. “Blackmail and war are the main strategies that states employ to acquire power, and balancing and buck-passing are the principal strategies that great powers use to maintain the distribution of power when facing a dangerous rival.” (Mearsheimer, 2001, p. 13)

If states are always seeking power, they should continue to do so until they actually gain power, otherwise the use of force would be an ineffective

strategy to ensure survival.<sup>16</sup> Of course there may be states that execute military strategies poorly, but if victory were to be a rare outcome then the whole notion of offensive action and its efficacy would be called into question—as would the foundations of the theory. Militarized disputes (a simple and accurate way to measure military victory in relation to power politics) with two major powers involved should repeat until the major power gains a decisive outcome. One cannot gain power from a dispute unless their party actually wins that dispute. It follows that war and disputes would then not serve as the primary strategy to gain power if decisive outcomes in these disputes were not the norm (militarized interstate disputes include wars). The history of interactions between states will need to be considered; therefore, here we focus on rival dyads. Rival dyads are those pairs of states identified as long-standing historical enemies who constantly fight about any issue as long as relative positions are considered when state action is determined (Valeriano, 2003).

*H3: Once a major power uses force or the threat of force against any power, it should continue to do so until it achieves decisive victory.*

As far as strategies intended to maintain power are concerned, Mearsheimer only lists balancing and buck-passing as options (2001, p. 13). Balancing behavior involves the act of acquiring power to reach a state of equality with an adversary prior to or during war. An opposing theory is bandwagoning, which entails joining with a threatening power in hopes of maintaining one's own power. Each predicts the direct opposite of the other, according to offensive realist theory.

Bandwagoning (and appeasement) should not be valid options for major powers. "Both of those strategies call for conceding power to an aggressor, which violates balance-of-power logic and increases the danger to the states that employ them. Great powers that care about their survival should neither appease nor bandwagon with their adversaries." (Mearsheimer, 2001, p. 162) If this is true, then great powers should not bandwagon during war.

*H4: Major powers will not show evidence of bandwagoning strategies.*

## Polarity

Mearsheimer (2001), along with Waltz (1979), considers the distribution of power in the system to be an important structural variable. We will seek to test the conflict-proneness of the different system structures. Mearsheimer (2001, p. 337) suggests unbalanced bipolarity, balanced bipolarity, unbalanced multipolarity, and balanced multipolarity as outcomes. He does not believe that unbalanced bipolarity is a useful real-world category, so this consideration drops out of the typology.

Mearsheimer (2001, p. 335) concludes that, “bipolar systems tend to be the most peaceful, and unbalanced multipolar systems are more prone to deadly conflict.” Here we test this proposition according to war and militarized dispute involvement of major and minor powers from 1816 to 1992. Is Mearsheimer correct in his ranking of the system structures relation to peace?

In his original analysis, Mearsheimer only considered the European system from 1792 to 1990. Table 2 lists the system configurations and years involved according to Mearsheimer. He finds that bipolarity is the most peaceful type of systemic distribution of power. There were no great power wars during the period of bipolarity (the Cold War) and only 10,000 military deaths. Balanced multipolarity is the next least-conflictual outcome, with five major-major power wars resulting in 1.2 million military deaths. Finally, unbalanced multipolarity is the more war-prone type of distribution in that there was one major-major power war and three wars involving members of the central system resulting in a total of 27 million military deaths. This analysis examines the global system and the relationship between polarity and conflict involvement.

*H5: Bipolarity, then balanced multipolarity, and finally unbalanced multipolarity should be the most peaceful system to the most war-prone, in rank order.*

### Rival Explanations

It next might be useful to put offensive realism to a head-to-head test with other rival explanations. There are two prime candidates for this enterprise: the territorial theory of conflict and a “norms”-based approach to conflict. Using Wallensteen’s (1984) periods of peace argument, we will consider whether or not offensive action varies according to the system of norms in operation at the time of conflict. According to offensive realism, conflict should remain consistent for major power dyads, no matter what period or era. Peace should not be more prevalent during any given time period. Do individual states’ decisions about the feasibility of offensive action dictate when offensive power can be used, as Mearsheimer claims, or do the norms in the system dictate the application of offensive power? If we were to find that major power dyads are less likely to go to war or engage in militarized disputes during certain periods of time, we would accept this as evidence

**TABLE 2** Polarity Types and Years

Bipolarity	(1945–1990)
Balanced Multipolarity	(1815–1902, 1919–1938)
Unbalanced Multipolarity	(1903–1918, 1939–1945)

that Mearsheimer fails to consider accurately when peace and war occur for major power dyads.

*H6: Major power dyads should maintain a constant rate of conflict and war, no matter what historical era or system of norms they are operating in during the conflict.*<sup>17</sup>

The next head-to-head test involves the territorial explanation of conflict. It may be true that pairs of states only act in an offensive fashion when threatened with a territorial dispute. To test this, we look at the probability of conflict for major state dyads regarding territorial issues and other, non-territorial issues. Are major power dyads more likely to fight a militarized dispute or war when territory is in question, or is the probability of conflict in regards to issue type inconsequential, as Mearsheimer suggests? If we were to find that pairs of states only act offensively during disputes over a territorial issue, that would lend support to an issue-based paradigm as being more predictive than the offensive realist paradigm.

*H7: Disputes involving major power dyads should be equally likely to escalate, regardless of issue type.*

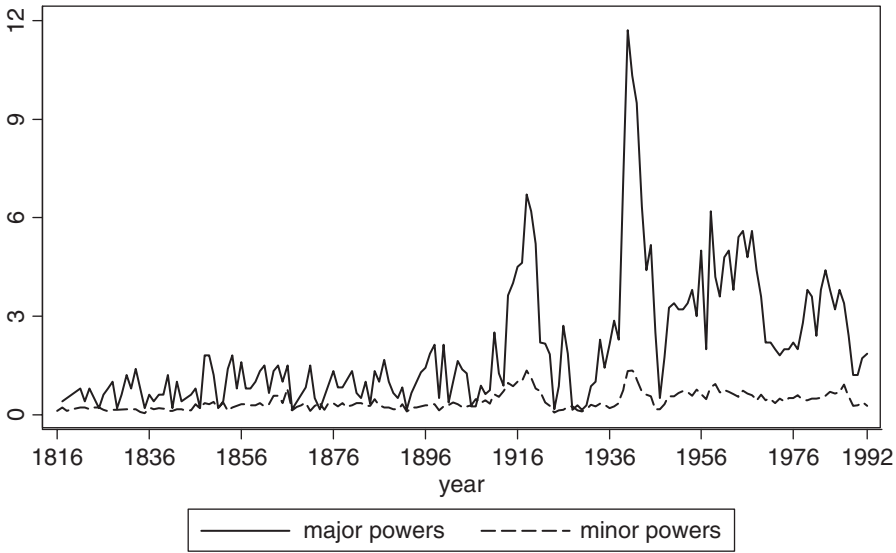
## RESULTS<sup>18</sup>

To test the various hypotheses outlined above, we relied mainly on Correlates of War dispute and war data. Militarized Interstate Disputes (MIDs) are defined as “united historical cases of conflict in which the threat, display, or use of military force short of war by one member state is explicitly directed toward the government, official representatives, official forces, property, or territory of another state” (Jones, Bremer et al., 1996, p. 163). The intensity scale ranges from threats, to use of force, to observed war with over 1000 battle deaths.

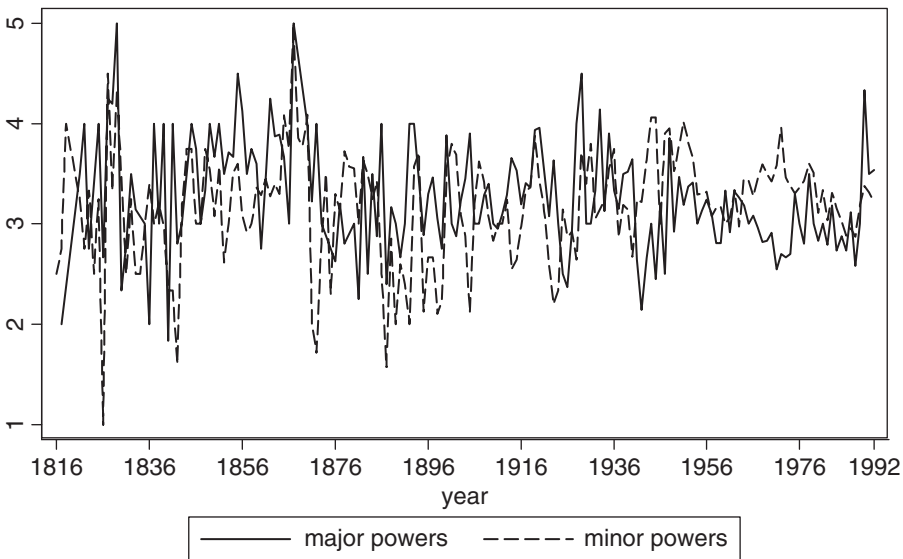
### The Importance of Major Powers

There are two ways to look at hypothesis one. The first is to look at the mean number of disputes for major powers and minor powers monadically by year. Figure 1 was constructed by dividing the total number of major powers in the system by the number of disputes in a given year. The second line in the figure divides the total number of minor powers in the system by the number of minor power disputes during a given year.

From Figure 1, we can see that the first part of this hypothesis is confirmed. Major powers are more likely to become involved in disputes than minor powers. This result is surprising considering that major powers comprise the minority of states in the system. For example, in 1992, the number



**FIGURE 1** Mean number of major and minor power dispute involvements by year.



**FIGURE 2** Mean major and minor power level of hostilities by year.

of minor powers is greater than major powers of a ratio of 160 minors to 8 majors. Regardless of the number of major powers in the system, major powers are more likely to be involved in disputes.

Figure 2 shows the results for the hypothesis regarding the level of conflict for major and minor powers. Here we calculate the mean hostility

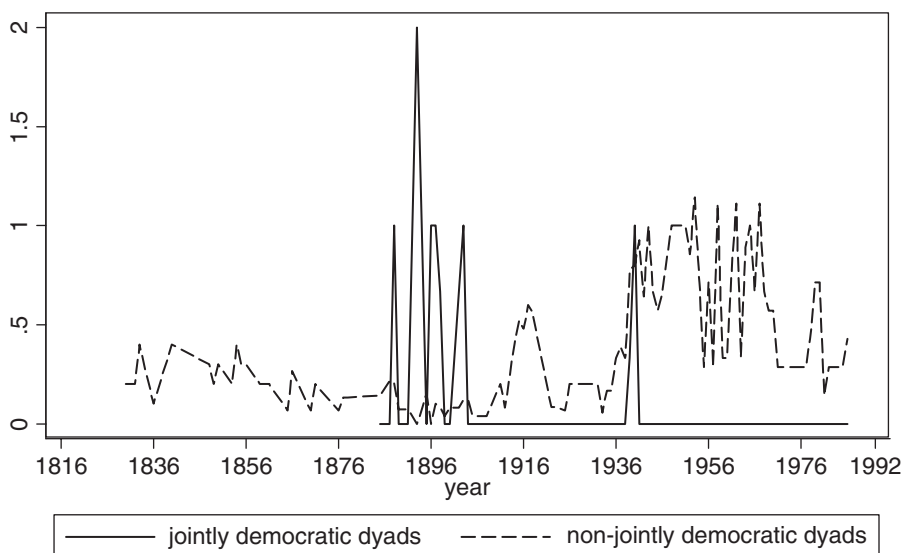
level for major and minor powers in the system for each year. There is really no noticeable difference between the level of hostility for major and minor powers. As Figure 2 shows, some years the level of hostility is greater from major powers; in others, the level of hostility is greater for minor powers.

Figure 3 presents results for hypothesis two. Here we find that the rate of conflict is indeed greater for nondemocratic major powers. While democratic major powers are likely to become involved in conflict some of the time, nondemocratic states are more likely to take hostile actions against other major powers.

### Victory and Power in the International System

Hypothesis three relates the ability of major powers to achieve victorious outcomes during disputes and wars. Offensive realist theory would suggest that major powers would not stop a conflict until they reached a decisive victory. Victory allows for conquest and tribute so that one nation may increase its capabilities through the defeat of another power. If major powers truly are good offensive realists, they would not end a conflict unless at least one side achieves victory. Consequently, victory should be the most persistent settlement outcome for major power disputes if Mearsheimer is correct.

Table 3 shows that major powers only reach victory in approximately 14 percent of their disputes. There are 1574 disputes involving major powers,



**FIGURE 3** Mean number of major–major power dyad dispute involvements by regime type.

**TABLE 3** Major Power Disputes and Victory

Victory achieved?	Major power disputes
No	1355 (86.09%)
Yes	219 (13.91%)
Total	1574

but only a very small proportion of those conflicts end with a victory for the major power. While these disputes may recur until one side reaches victory, Table 3 shows that the overwhelming majority of conflicts do not achieve the goals of major powers. Thus, victory by major powers is not a necessary characteristic of major power disputes. If a low percentage of victory (14%) were acceptable to states then the theory does not hold much value empirically.

Table 4 presents the results for victory according to recurring conflict or rivalry, possibly a more accurate test of the victory hypothesis since disputes are taken as historical units, not isolated events. According to Goertz and Diehl (1992; 1993), the rivalry population will include isolated conflicts (1–2 disputes), proto-rivalries (3–5 disputes), and enduring rivalries (6+ disputes over 20 years). Diehl and Goertz (2000) identify and produce a dataset that accounts for all types of rivalry and the militarized disputes that correspond with each rivalry.<sup>19</sup>

As the operational classification rules for isolated, proto, and enduring rivalries are arrived at ex post, we seek to avoid this problem in our analysis by categorizing the rivalries in an ex ante manner. That is, we consider the first and second disputes in proto rivalry relationships as belonging to the isolated rivalry stage. Likewise, the third to fifth disputes experienced by enduring rivalries are analyzed together with those of proto rivalries. Only the sixth and subsequent disputes between enduring rivals are considered as disputes taking place in an enduring rivalry context.

**TABLE 4** Major Power Rivalries and Victory

Victory achieved?	Major power disputes
Isolated Stage (1st and 2nd Disputes; Ex Ante Coding)	
No	756 (84.66%)
Yes	137 (15.34%)
Total	893
Proto Stage (3rd to 5th Disputes; Ex Ante Coding)	
No	261 (86.14%)
Yes	42 (13.86%)
Total	303
Enduring Stage (6th Dispute and Onwards; Ex Ante Coding)	
No	338 (89.42%)
Yes	40 (10.58%)
Total	378

When classified according to dispute sequences, we find a decreasing relationship between rivalry stage and victory outcomes. Over fifteen percent, 15.3 to be exact, of the first and second disputes between all rival dyads that involve at least one major power end in victory for the major power. This percentage drops to 13.9 percent during the proto rivalry stage. Finally, only 10.6 percent of the disputes occurring during the enduring rival stage end in victory. This once again shows that disputes among major powers are not likely to end in a victorious outcome, demonstrating that disputes do not necessarily strengthen major power actors that seek to enhance their capabilities through conquest and domination.<sup>20</sup>

### Are Major Powers Likely to Balance?

We ascertain the relative frequency of balancing and bandwagoning behavior by major power states during wars by using the Correlates of War Project's Interstate War Participants (1816–1992) and Composite Index of National Capabilities (CINC) data sets. The former provides information concerning when the major powers in question actually entered wars that were already ongoing, and on which side they joined. Obviously, instances in which major powers are one of the two initial belligerents do not count as either balancing or bandwagoning observations because the two concepts imply major power actions that either result in the formation or expansion of warring coalitions beyond the initial disputants.

Using this information, the CINC data set is then used to calculate the aggregate “power” of the two warring coalitions *at the time of their joining*. If the major power joins the currently weaker side, it is coded as balancing; if it joins the currently stronger side, then it is bandwagoning.

- Balancing: 16 (55.17%)
- Bandwagoning: 13 (44.83%)
- Total: 29

The results show that major power states have indeed bandwagoned during wartime, and such occurrences cannot be said to be rare, since bandwagoning constitutes close to forty-five percent of major power entries into ongoing wars. A revised version of offensive realism would have to account for the bandwagoning tendencies of major powers. Realists typically assert that major powers should not bandwagon if their main goal is security; however, any theory of offensive action should be able to account for instances of bandwagoning behavior. In light of this finding, it may be that states only act offensively and also balance when the norms in the system are not restricting. States may bandwagon when the norms in the system are agreed upon and offensive action is discouraged.

Periods of Polarity and Conflict

As mentioned earlier, Mearsheimer asserts that periods of bipolarity, balanced multipolarity, and unbalanced multipolarity should be ranked from least to most war prone, in the above order. He supports this assertion with summary statistics on the number of wars, frequency of war years, and fatalities, using a set of European wars (2001, p. 357). We test for the general validity of his claim by extending the set of relevant wars to all wars that have been fought in the system from 1816 to 1992, based upon the Correlates of War Interstate War List.

The information presented in Tables 5 through 7 contest Mearsheimer's claim that bipolarity is the most peaceful (least war prone) system. In fact, regardless of whether the number of wars, number of ongoing war years, or total deaths is used, bipolarity is not the most peaceful system. On all three measures, bipolarity is the second most war-prone system.

While unbalanced multipolarity continues to be the most deadly type of system in terms of deaths and proportion of ongoing war years, it is not necessarily the most war-prone in terms of total number of unique wars that occurred. If one considers that minor powers also play an important role in international interactions, balanced multipolar systems experience the most frequent amount of war.

**TABLE 5** Number of Wars by Type of Polarity

	Minor-minor wars	Major-major wars	Major-minor wars	All wars
Bipolarity	14	1	8	23
Balanced Multipolarity	18	5	21	44
Unbalanced Multipolarity	5	4	3	12

**TABLE 6** Proportion of Ongoing War Years by Type of Polarity

	Total years	War years	% of years with war
Bipolarity	46	32	69.6
Balanced Multipolarity	106	52	49.05
Unbalanced Multipolarity	23	21	91.3

**TABLE 7** Total Deaths by Type of Polarity

	Total deaths
Bipolarity	3.33 million
Balanced Multipolarity	2.78 million
Unbalanced Multipolarity	25.6 million

It appears that unbalanced multipolarity is the most dangerous type of system in terms of total deaths and number of great power wars. Yet this fact is only supported by the inclusion of World War I and II.<sup>21</sup> The total years covered for this period is less uniform than the rest of the categories (unbalanced multipolarity includes 23 years while bipolarity and balanced multipolarity include a total of 106 years). It seems that the category of unbalanced multipolarity was added to increase the strength of the prediction.

### Norms and Constant Conflict?

To test hypothesis six, each unique dispute and war involving at least one major power is categorized into the periods delineated by Wallenstein, according to the year in which it began. Then, the number of disputes in each period is divided by the length of the period to arrive at a measure of average dispute occurrences per year, for that period (Table 8).

Particularist periods are marked by more occurrences of disputes involving major powers, as compared to the universalist periods. This trend holds even when we are reminded that over time, more newly independent states have entered into the global system. Maoz (1989) finds that newly independent nations are more likely to experience war and disputes.

Rank ordered, the particularist period of 1933–1944 has the highest rate of dispute occurrence, followed immediately by the particularist period of 1945–1962. Compared to these two periods, the universalist period that follows (1963–1976) contains a lower rate of dispute occurrence. For major power disputes, there is no uniform pattern of nations constantly striving to gain power through conflict.

We also see a similar pattern for war during Wallenstein's periods. The particularist periods from 1933–1944, 1896–1918, and 1849–1870 each experience the highest number of wars. The universalist periods from 1963–1976, 1919–1932, and 1816–1848 each experience less than five wars during the period. These results show that during times when the international system

**TABLE 8** Rate of Dispute Occurrences by Period

Time period	Classification	# Years	# Unique disputes	# Disputes per year	# Wars
1816–1848	Universalist	33	43	1.3	4
1849–1870	Particularist	22	46	2.1	10
1871–1895	Universalist	25	53	2.1	4
1896–1918	Particularist	23	142	6.2	12
1919–1932	Universalist	14	58	4.1	4
1933–1944	Particularist	12	188	15.7	22
1945–1962	Particularist	18	177	9.8	5
1963–1976	Universalist	14	127	9.1	2

is dominated by major powers that agree on the rules of international action, war is experienced less frequently.

### Issues and Constant Conflict?

To test hypothesis seven, each unique dispute involving at least one major-power state is categorized into territorial, policy, and regime issue types. We also observe whether or not the dispute escalated into an interstate war (Table 9).

The proportion of dispute escalations according to issue type is not equal across the various issue categories. Eighteen percent of territorial disputes escalate to war. Territorial disputes are more likely to escalate than both policy and regime disputes.

This finding contrasts against the expectation of offensive realism, or realism in general, which does not distinguish between the issues at stake in interactions involving major powers. Regardless of polarity, we find that major powers are more likely to experience war if there are territorial issues at stake.

## ASSESSMENT

The results for hypothesis one suggest Mearsheimer is correct to a point. The rate of conflict for major powers is indeed greater than for minor powers. We also know that the level of hostility for major power conflict and minor power conflict does not differ greatly. Results here do correspond with Bremer's (1992) finding that major powers are more war prone. Mearsheimer is correct to hypothesize that major power conflict is more likely to occur than minor power conflict.

Offensive realism suggests that conflict should be uniform, at least among great powers. While Figure 1 does show that major powers are more likely to engage in conflict than minor powers, Figure 2 shows that the level of hostility between major and minor powers does not vary. This means that major powers are engaged in more conflict than minor powers (probably because of widespread interests and ability), but that the intensity of conflict does not differ. Both engage in dangerous conflict with a high level of fatalities.

**TABLE 9** Proportion of Dispute Escalations by Issue Type

	# of escalations	# of non-escalations	Total #	% of escalations
Territory	33	149	182	18.1
Policy	24	505	529	4.5
Regime	3	62	65	4.6

Each type of state can create devastating scenarios in the international system by engaging in conflict, and possibly bring others into the conflict.

Mearsheimer's version of offensive realism makes no distinction about the type of government within a state. He believes that regardless of internal politics, great powers are likely to actively seek hegemony through conquest. Figure 3 shows that nondemocratic major powers are more likely than democratic major powers to become involved in a dispute during any given year. Offensive realism is not correct: all major powers do not act alike. We know that democracies do not fight each other (Ray, 1995; Ray, 1998; Bueno de Mesquita, Morrow, et al., 1999) and we also know that for major powers, democratic states are less likely to act like offensive realists.

Hypothesis three suggests that major power disputes should be characterized by victory outcomes. According to offensive realism, major powers become involved in disputes to gain power and seek hegemony. If major powers have not been able to achieve victory according to the goals of the actions laid out prior to war, then it can be said that major powers do not gain from conflict. We find that only fourteen percent of major power disputes end in a victory outcome, thus major powers do not "gain" power from conflict because their goals are not achieved. A majority of disputes between states remain unresolved. Offensive realist theory would suggest that states actively use disputes to gain power; however, this is not the case for major power disputes. In the context of recurring disputes where each fights repeatedly to achieve a positive outcome, this pattern again holds. Major power disputes are not typically associated with positive settlement outcomes and cannot contribute to the capabilities of major powers since conquest or victory outcomes are so rare.

Hypothesis four indicates that major powers will not show evidence of bandwagoning strategies when they decide to join an ongoing war. Our results indicate that this is not the case. Close to half the instances of major power war joining behavior can be classified as bandwagoning. The motives behind this choice may vary, but the fact remains that major powers do not balance in an offensive manner as predicted by offensive realist theory.

In terms of hypothesis five, it does appear that unbalanced multipolarity is the most dangerous systemic distribution of power. However, this fact is only supported by the inclusion of the world wars in the category. In terms of total wars, both bipolar and balanced multipolarity systems include more wars with major versus minor powers. Unbalanced multipolarity includes one less major power war than balanced multipolarity. This is true only for the case of total deaths in the system. It seems that unbalanced multipolarity is only capturing times when major powers have outstanding issues with other major powers during a short period of time. It is not clear that the typology of systems that Mearsheimer codes can actually predict the number of wars during any period of time.

Hypothesis six suggests that conflict among great powers should be uniform, regardless of the periods Wallensteen delineates. Wallensteen's periods are taken from historians' judgments regarding the norms in the international system at various times. It seems that these periods more accurately explain major power war than Mearsheimer's polarity periods. Here we also do not run into problems of selecting on the dependent variable, which is the amount of war in the system. Wallensteen first asked which years fall into which periods and then measured the amount of war. Using updated Correlates of War data on disputes and war, we find that Wallensteen's periods accurately describe the course of great power politics.

Finally, for hypothesis seven we predicted that major powers would be likely to escalate to war in a uniform pattern. We, on the other hand, find that certain issue types are more war-prone than others. This finding shows that the territorial explanation of war (Vasquez, 1993) more accurately predicts the occurrences of major power war. Major powers are more likely to go to war if they fight over territorial issues.

It should be clear that we believe that other opposing theories surpass the propositions of offensive realism in providing a better explanation of offensive actions by major powers. While a norms- or issues-based approach alone may not provide completely adequate explanations for all international action, these theories do provide better explanations than those based on offensive realism. What might be more feasible in the future is a combined approach that accounts for hegemonic activities of major powers toward minor powers (offensive realism), a regional-based power transition test (Lemke, 2002), territorial issues, and the norms in the system. This combined model may be able to provide an accurate picture of the true origins of the "tragedy of great power politics." In any case, it is clear that offensive realism alone cannot predict the actions of major powers against other major or minor powers.

The fact that offensive realism fails to accurately describe great power behavior in the past does not bode well for the theory. While major powers are more war and dispute-prone than minor powers, the results here show that offensive realism does not accurately describe major power dispute behavior. It is little use as a theory if it fails in this fundamental test. Offensive realism could be reevaluated (James, 2009) to incorporate the predictions and results from other theoretical models, but it seems that this would be a degenerative step for the paradigm (Vasquez, 1997). We find little support for the proposition that the blood lust of hegemony-seeking major powers accounts for the incidence of war and disputes at the systemic or dyadic level of analysis. Lemke (2004) even finds that offensive realism fails to describe great power behavior in the 1990s.

## CONCLUSION

Mearsheimer (2001, p. 36) asserts that little can be done to ameliorate the security dilemma in world politics. However, we find that there are two types of peaceful systems where major power war is experienced less frequently. If the major powers in the system agreed on the normative rules that guide their actions (Wallensteen, 1984), they are less likely to experience wars and disputes. We also know that if major powers do not fight over territorial issues, they are less likely to go to war (Vasquez and Valeriano, 2008). These results show that two other theories, one norms-based approach and an issue-based approach, accurately describe major power conflict behavior more accurately than offensive realism. When put in a head-to-head test, offensive realism fails. We have found that basic propositions outlining offensive realism are false and that two other theories perform better. These two findings are solid enough for us to reject offensive realism as a predictive and normative theory.

Offensive realism is meant to be both a normative and an empirically accurate theory. Nevertheless, states do not act “like good offensive realists” as Mearsheimer (2001, p. 12) suggests. In fact, during certain periods of time, states do not act offensively at all. Under the universalist category, major powers rarely experience war. There is no tragedy of great power politics. The only tragedy is to ignore the findings derived from a norms- or issue-based approach.

While the United States has failed to assert its hegemonic ambitions against other great powers in the twenty first century, it has used aggressive power to control minor powers (Afghanistan, Iraq, and Serbia). Offensive realism seems to work where it should not, in the description of major power behavior in regards to minor powers. It seems that the policy advice ascertained from Mearsheimer (2001) is inaccurate and is rather more precise in explaining how states act toward minor powers, rather than other major powers. Accordingly, it could be said that great powers are only primed for the offensive against minor powers and not each other.

## NOTES

1. For an early investigation of the role of realism in international relations theory see Vasquez (1983; 1998).

2. Other offensive realist work includes Layne (1993, 2000), Labs (1997), and Zakaria (1998). In this article, Mearsheimer (2001) is taken as the exemplar of the emerging research program.

3. See Levy (1983) for a description of who the great powers are and their war involvement in since 1495.

4. Some suggest that offensive realism is really a theory about regional hegemony, but the goal of global hegemony is clear throughout Mearsheimer’s (2001) book. Mearsheimer (2001, p. 2) states early on, “their ultimate aim is to be the hegemon—that is, the only great power in the system.”

5. It should be noted that Mearsheimer's theory seems to apply mainly to Western/United States actions, yet the goals of explanation are clearly universal.

6. Mearsheimer also suggests that the causal mechanism in his theory is fear (2001, p. 32). This factor is unlikely to be a mechanism for dyadic or systemic interactions.

7. Satisfaction plays an important role in other power politics theories such as the power transition theory (Organski and Kugler, 1980).

8. Conflict is defined as a difference of preferred bargaining outcomes.

9. The terms *great powers* and *major powers* are used interchangeably in this paper. The term major power has been discussed extensively in the field (Small and Singer, 1982) and thus will be used to test the term great power. The term great power is meant to signify strong and important actors in the system but there is no clear empirical definition of just who is a great power. Appendix A identifies the major powers in the system.

10. The norms-based theory operates at the systemic level, the same as offensive realism. The territorial based theory operates at the dyadic level but seems to explain great power actions better than offensive realism. Offensive realism can also be read as a dyadic theory in that it predicts whom states will fight against.

11. While some might contend that Wallensteen's periods are still open to interpretation, it is important to remember that Wallensteen collected information from historians and did not pose his own views on the coding of time periods. It is in this way that Wallensteen's operationalization of norms in the system can be considered reliable.

12. It would be interesting to test the regional hegemony implications of Mearsheimer's (2001) theory but this task is beyond the scope of this article.

13. Testing the territorial explanation of war has encountered various criticisms that contend it does not account for the rise of territorial disputes in the first place (Lemke and Reed, 2001). Senese and Vasquez (2003) find that territorial claims increase the probability of a MID occurring and then territorial MIDs increase the probability of war. There is no selection effect at work in the study of territory and conflict.

14. Hypotheses 1 and 2 are logical extensions of offensive realism and are suitable tests of the theory because if found true, they would directly counter the predictions that Mearsheimer (2001) lays out.

15. Coding of major powers is taken from Small and Singer (1982). Appendix A lists these cases.

16. It could be argued that states "calculate" their ability to win disputes and therefore might stop action before victory is achieved due to strategic calculations about the balance of power and other state's reactions. Yet this proposition (Mearsheimer, 2001, p. 37) seems to only apply to calculations before, not during, action, therefore it is important to ask if once offensive action is started, is it ever successful in ensuring survival and maximizing power.

17. It should be noted that this statement does not apply to systems of polarity that were previously discussed, only that norms should not matter for major powers according to the theory of offensive realism.

18. Replication data can be found at [tigger.uic.edu/~bvaler](http://tigger.uic.edu/~bvaler)

19. Available at <http://www.pol.uiuc.edu/faculty/diehl.html>

20. It should be noted that major powers may enter into conflict with an expectation of victory but still fail in their efforts. This is an interesting proposition, but there is no empirical evidence that can be used to compare the expectations of actors versus the actual outcomes. Case studies may get at this question, but cannot be conducted in the limited space available.

21. While the theory would be of little use if it did not include these wars in the most dangerous category, there is no evidence to suggest that the current classification can predict these wars.

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## APPENDIX A: MAJOR POWERS IN THE SYSTEM (1816–PRESENT)

United States	1898–
United Kingdom	1816–
France	1816–1940
France	1945–
Germany (Prussia)	1816–1918
Germany	1925–1945
Germany	1991–
Austria-Hungary	1816–1918
Italy	1860–1943
Russia	1816–1917
Russia	1922–
China	1950–
Japan	1895–1945
Japan	1991–