

BOOK REVIEWS

Stephen Biddle. *Military Power: Explaining Victory and Defeat in Modern Battle*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2004. Pp. 312. \$37.50, hardcover.

As Clausewitz wrote, “war is a mere continuation of policy by other means.” Policy and political decisions determine when wars are fought, how they are fought, and how they end; these factors lead to new directions of study in political science, where researchers can look at the complexity of war outcomes in addition to the causes of war.

Recent work in political science has found that democracies disproportionately win the wars that they fight. They tend to win, even when attacked. There are exceptions to this empirical finding, of course, but it does provide a new area of research into war outcomes in the context of military strategy. General theories suggest that democracies win the wars they fight because they are able to select themselves into wars of their choosing, and thus only choose to fight wars they are likely to win. This might be partly true, but there is a deeper dynamic at work. Stephen Biddle’s book *Military Power* provides a new and novel solution to the theoretical problem of why states win the wars they fight.

Biddle suggests, and finds empirical support for, the hypothesis that states win the wars they fight because of the variable modern-system tactics. Military effectiveness is not explained by the capabilities a state possesses or their technology (which, according to his analysis, provide no better an estimate of war performance than a coin flip); rather, effectiveness is explained by examining how states deploy and use the forces they have under their command. This interesting new variable can be utilized in the study of war outcomes, and was previously unstudied because of the difficulty in testing such a hypothesis systematically. Biddle argues that we need to look beyond traditional conceptions of military power and consider the role of tactics and doctrine in warfare.

The modern-system variable looks at force employment and strategic doctrines/tactics used during warfare. Biddle argues that the variable dampens the effects of technology on the battlefield. If a state employs modern-system tactics (concentrated firepower, coverage, deep reserves, leadership initiative, and swift movement), they are likely to make large territorial gains and inflict massive casualties. He also seems to be alluding to force modernization as an important variable in terms of military effectiveness. The revolution in military affairs

(RMA) is not a factor when states use modern-system tactics and are able to mitigate the effects of technology.

Hidden within the modern-system analysis is the suggestion that autocracies or unstable states cannot—and do not—effectively deploy their forces as well as they should. Autocracies have complex command structures that do not utilize individual initiative as democratic volunteer armies do. Other states may be unable to provide the complex, long-term training that effective force deployment requires. It is clear that the reason some states win the wars they fight is because of the type of state they are and how they deploy their forces.

Testing the theory, Biddle takes the methodological triangulation approach. Using case studies, statistical analysis, formal modeling, and simulations at once is one of the few examples I can name of true methodologically plurality. Every researcher should strive to test their theory across as many different social science methods as possible. One should not be satisfied with a simple case study, but also strive to show that their theory works systematically (e.g., large N statistically) and formally (e.g., game theory). Military tacticians would be particularly interested in Biddle's case studies examining tactics employed in the second Battle of the Somme, Operation Goodwood in World War II, and Operation Desert Storm in the Gulf War. Biddle finds significant evidence to challenge conventional wisdom about capabilities and technology, suggesting that there are parallels across each battle during large periods of time.

This book has wide implications for military policy in general. The most important is that capabilities alone do not determine victory. It matters how a state deploys the forces they have available and under what circumstances. While it would be logical that all states employ a modern-system battlefield tactical plan, this is not universally true and should be remembered by policy-makers. Finally, the book largely rejects the idea that the future of technology will change how wars are fought. Biddle argues that warfare doctrines of force deployment have not really changed in their effectiveness despite different forms of technological advancement. There is not likely to be any new system of weapons developed that will mitigate tactical deployment unless weapons are developed that would make the battlefield completely visible. Leaders should look to the lessons of the past to learn how to fight wars, and not concentrate on new technological improvements. In terms of defense expenditures and weapons systems, policy-makers should not focus on advanced weapons systems that would replace traditional ground forces. They should also not sacrifice training under the assumption that the battlefield of the future will be largely technological and faceless.

I do have a few concerns with the book. First of all, a minor quibble about the theory's name, the *modern-system theory*. I wish the author could have come up with a more suitable title that would also convey something about the variable in use. It easily could be called force deployment theory. Using a label such as modern-system theory could lead to confusion with world-systems theory, and it also implies that a state that does not deploy modern-system tactics is not modern. This clearly is not true; states may not be able to use forces effectively because of the structure of their society (autocratic) or for economic reasons.

I also suggest that the author not completely abandon previous analyses of such factors as capabilities, technology, or state government type. While focusing on the modern-system theory is useful and clearly superior methodologically, we should not completely discard older variables, but strive instead toward the accumulation of knowledge. It is my contention that Biddle's overall predictive power would be increased if he were to take into account capabilities and technology as an additive variable that would reflect the amassed knowledge about military effectiveness. Biddle does consider this in the chapter on simulation, but rejects testing the idea. I think there is merit to the notion that the effects of force employment, technology, capabilities, and state-system type might be additive in their cumulative impact.

There are also slight problems with the statistical analysis; the book and the community would be better served by developing a new statistical variable for modern-system tactics rather than using a dummy variable. It would also be helpful to include predicted probabilities in the statistical analysis so we have a better measure of predictive power than the R^2 traditional in ordinary least squares (OLS) analysis. My suggestion would be to utilize logistical regression, where the dependent variable might be victory rather than the ratio of force losses or territory gained.

Biddle overcomes many obstacles and provides a new direction in the study of war outcomes and military effectiveness. This work is a potentially groundbreaking application in the study of why states win the wars they fight. I applaud his methodical plurality and the novelty of his hypothesis. States do not win the wars they fight because they only select "winnable" wars to fight, but likely because of how they employ the forces they have available. This may not be a groundbreaking conclusion from the tactical-operational standpoint. Yet in the social sciences this hypothesis has not been tested until now, and the rigor of the methods leaves little debate as to the utility and success of Biddle's theory.

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