

Better Now Than Later

Jack Snyder

The Paradox of 1914 as Everyone's Favored Year for War

One reason why Europe went to war in 1914 is that all of the continental great powers judged it a favorable moment for a fight, and all were pessimistic about postponing the fight until later. On its face, this explanation constitutes a paradox. Still, each power had a superficially plausible reason for thinking this was true.

Germany wanted to fight to forestall the planned future growth of Russian military might. France wanted to fight because the Balkan *casus belli* would bring Russia into the war, guaranteeing that France would not be left to face the German army alone. Austria wanted to fight because Germany had given it a blank check to help solve its endemic, existential security problems in the Balkans. Russia wanted to fight because, unlike in some previous Balkan crises, its army was reasonably prepared and France was already committed to fight.

All of these reasons, however, especially Russia's, prompt crucial questions in ways that merely deepen the paradox. The basic facts about the military and economic capabilities of the powers, their likely war plans, and their domestic political constraints were more or less common knowledge. What would happen in the event of war was fraught with great uncertainty, but this largely shared unknown did not include huge asymmetries of private knowledge. Moreover, key statesmen in each of the powers considered defeat and social upheaval to lie within the scope of possibility. In a dark moment, German Chief of the General Staff Helmuth von Moltke said that he expected "a war which will annihilate the civilization of almost the whole of Europe for decades to come" and bring pressures for revolution.¹ German Chancellor

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1. L.C.F. Turner, *Origins of the First World War* (New York: W.W. Norton, 1970), p. 105; and Helmuth von Moltke, quoted in Helmut Haessler, *General William Groener and the Imperial German Army* (Madison: State Historical Society of Wisconsin, 1962), p. 50.

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Theobald von Bethmann Hollweg decided not to replant trees on his East Prussia estate because the Russian army would soon be overrunning it.² Yet each country decided that 1914 would be a favorable year for war despite having roughly similar information and fearing a chance of disaster.

This kind of paradox is not only an interesting puzzle in its own right, but it has long been seen as a central cause of this war and of wars in general. Decades ago Geoffrey Blainey wrote that wars happen when the sides disagree about their relative power, and each thinks it can win, expecting to do better by fighting than bargaining.³ William Wohlforth documented this puzzle for 1914, explaining how Blainey's argument figured into calculations that impelled Europe to war.⁴ James Fearon later extended and formalized Blainey's insights, using examples from 1914 to illustrate the conditions under which rational states would fight costly wars rather than find a cheaper bargain that could avoid the fight, namely, private information, commitment problems, and indivisibility of stakes.⁵

This hugely and justly influential literature leaves unanswered crucial questions about the timing paradox and its role in causing the war. I argue that none of Fearon's three rationalist mechanisms, articulated in their strictest form, can explain the paradox of the universal, simultaneous view of 1914 as a favorable year for war. Two mechanisms that play a marginal role in his analysis, however—bounded rationality in multidimensional power assessments and attempts to mitigate power shifts through coercive diplomacy—help to explain how Europe's powers became trapped in a choice between war now and war later. These mechanisms were set in motion by background strategic assumptions rooted in the culture of militarism and nationalism that perversely structured the options facing Europe's statesmen in 1914. Whereas Fearon's rationalist theory assumes that states are paying equal attention to all relevant information, in 1914 each power's strategic calculations were disproportionately shaped by self-absorption in its own domestic concerns and alliance anxieties, and this explains the paradox.

2. Margaret MacMillan, *The War That Ended Peace: The Road to 1914* (New York: Random House, 2013), pp. 561–562.

3. Geoffrey Blainey, *The Causes of War* (New York: Free Press, 1973), pp. 114–124.

4. William C. Wohlforth, "The Perception of Power: Russia in the Pre-1914 Balance," *World Politics*, Vol. 39, No. 3 (April 1987), p. 377.

5. James D. Fearon, "Rationalist Explanations for War," *International Organization*, Vol. 49, No. 3 (Summer 1995), pp. 379–414. See also Arthur A. Stein, "Respite or Resolutions? Recurring Crises and the Origins of War," in *The Next Great War? The Roots of World War I and the Risk of U.S.-China Conflict*, Richard N. Rosecrance and Steven E. Miller, eds. (Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 2015), pp. 13–23.

The Timing Paradox in Theory

How has the bargaining theory of war understood the puzzle of simultaneous optimism of rivals about their prospects in war? Blainey is concerned mainly with the consequences of disagreements about relative power and less with their causes. He notes that uncertainty about likely outcomes allows both sides to be optimistic, and that information learned in fighting the war reduces disagreements about relative power and leads to peace.⁶ What he does not emphasize, however, is that uncertainty should produce mutual pessimism about victory, and thus peace, just as often as it produces mutual optimism and war. Uncertainty per se helps to explain how random variations in expectations might sometimes cause war, but not why universal optimism and war will occur at any particular time.

Blainey also notes that emotions triggered by nationalism might make all sides irrationally optimistic. Adding widespread nationalism to the causal mix, however, does not necessarily lead to universal over-optimism. Europe's powers were not optimistic about everything in 1914. On the contrary, they were all pessimistic about their future prospects if they backed away from a fight in that year; that pessimism is what caused the war. Blainey identified an interesting mechanism, but he left loose ends.

Wohlforth, like Blainey, focuses more on the effects of perceived power, especially Russia's rising might, than on its causes. Wohlforth, drawing mainly on a largely descriptive book by Risto Ropponen, notes that France and Britain evaluated Russia's current military power more highly than did Germany and Austria, but Ropponen does not explain why.⁷ One of Wohlforth's conclusions is that Germany was probably wrong to expect that Russia would soon outstrip its power; thus preventive war to stop Russian growth was unnecessary.⁸ Indeed, Germany's impending insufficiency of ground forces was arguably caused mainly by Gen. Alfred von Schlieffen's unnecessarily demanding plan to start the two-front war with a go-for-broke offensive against France before turning toward Russia. Schlieffen himself admitted that "this is an enterprise for which we are too weak."⁹

6. Blainey, *The Causes of War*, pp. 53–56.

7. Wohlforth, "The Perception of Power," p. 376; and Risto Ropponen, *Die Kraft Russlands: Wie beurteilte die politische und militärische Führung der Europäischen Grossmächte in der Zeit von 1905 bis 1914* [Russia's strength: How the European great powers' leadership evaluated it] (Helsinki: Turun Sanomalehti, 1968).

8. Wohlforth, "The Perception of Power," p. 380.

9. Gerhard Ritter, *The Schlieffen Plan: Critique of a Myth* (New York: Praeger, 1958), p. 66.

Wohlforth's strongest argument about the causes of universal short-term optimism emphasizes a merely permissive condition: the near parity in power between the two alliances created the possibility that both sides might imagine the possibility of winning.¹⁰ This possibility was magnified by the widespread belief in the efficacy of offensive military operations, which turned small, perceived advantages in military power into temptations to engage in aggressive behavior and made moderate adverse shifts in power seem dire.¹¹ Still, Wohlforth's argument does not explain the paradox that all sides were more optimistic about war in 1914 than about war later.

Fearon broadens Blainey's argument to include not just disagreements about relative power but also differing estimates of the sides' "willingness to fight."¹² In this framework, Fearon offers three reasons why rational parties might decide to fight rather than come to an agreement that avoids the costs of war: (1) the sides have private information about their strength that they cannot credibly reveal, creating the Blainey problem of simultaneous optimism; (2) the sides cannot credibly commit to honor an agreement if their relative power shifts in the future; and (3) the sides see the stakes of the fight as indivisible in key respects. Subsequent scholarship has debated which of these three mechanisms best explains not only the origins of wars but also the timing and manner of their termination.¹³

The Timing Paradox in 1914

The year 1914 provides a redoubled version of the Blainey problem: not only did the major continental states somewhat overvalue the current relative power of their own alliance, but more important, they undervalued the likely relative power of their alliance in the future. This expectation that conditions could become much less favorable facilitated the conclusion that it would be better to fight sooner than later, even in the face of ambivalence and uncertainty about the outcome of the conflict.

Historian David Herrmann notes that impending changes in the military equilibrium "made the future appear ominous to both sides for different reasons. The situation was paradoxical, but the fears none the less vivid."¹⁴ For

10. Wohlforth, "The Perception of Power," p. 377.

11. Stephen Van Evera, "Why Cooperation Failed in 1914," *World Politics*, Vol. 38, No. 1 (October 1985), pp. 101–102.

12. Fearon, "Rationalist Explanations for War," pp. 393–395.

13. Dan Reiter, *How Wars End* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 2009).

14. David G. Herrmann, *The Arming of Europe and the Making of the First World War* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1996), p. 217.

the Central Powers, Germany's army expansion was peaking in 1914, and Austria seemed to be reaching the limits of the power potential of its ramshackle state. For the Triple Entente, in contrast, the Russian Duma had just passed a bill that would increase the army's size 40 percent by 1917, and France had just increased its length of military service from two years to three, which would produce a corresponding increase in the size of the standing army once the new cohorts were trained.¹⁵ Notwithstanding these seemingly rosy military trends, the Entente's nightmare was that its alliance would break up if the July crisis, which was engendered by the assassination of Austrian Archduke Franz Ferdinand on June 28, 1914, did not end favorably. Russia, weakened by the 1905 revolution and defeat in the 1904–05 Russo-Japanese War, had failed to back France in its showdowns with Germany over Morocco in 1905 and 1911. Meanwhile France had failed to support Russia against Austria and Germany in the Bosnia annexation crisis of 1909. One more such failure, especially given that the improving military balance removed the excuse of incapacity, might prove fatal to the allies' mutual trust and confidence. "If given the choice," says Herrmann, "the Entente leaders would have preferred to wait and fight a war later if necessary, but the crisis over Serbia forced them to decide at once. Both sides were therefore gambling over military eclipse in 1914."¹⁶

As a result, as they approached July 1914, both sides were in the mood to risk war now rather than face it in adverse conditions later, notwithstanding some hedging by key statesmen. German Foreign Minister Gottlieb von Jagow and his deputy, Arthur Zimmerman, both considered the moment particularly favorable.¹⁷ "I do not desire a preventive war," said Jagow, "but if we are called upon to fight, we must not funk it."¹⁸ A few weeks before the archduke's assassination in Sarajevo, Chief of the German General Staff von Moltke told Jagow that he should conduct his foreign policy "with the aim of provoking a war in the near future." He was cagier with Austrian Chief of the General Staff Franz Conrad von Hötzendorf, admitting there was a chance that Germany might not defeat France quickly. "I will do what I can. We are not superior to the French."¹⁹ Some argue that Moltke's preventive war talk, just as he was

15. William C. Fuller Jr., *Strategy and Power in Russia, 1600–1914* (New York: Free Press, 1992), p. 437; and Herrmann, *The Arming of Europe and the Making of the First World War*, p. 202.

16. Herrmann, *The Arming of Europe and the Making of the First World War*, p. 218.

17. MacMillan, *The War That Ended Peace*, pp. 559–560.

18. *Ibid.*, p. 563.

19. *Ibid.*, p. 560. For the Austrians' "better now than later" attitude, see Samuel R. Williamson Jr., "Aggressive and Defensive Aims of Political Elites? Austro-Hungarian Policy in 1914," in Holger Afflerbach and David Stevenson, eds., *An Improbable War: The Outbreak of World War I and European Political Culture before 1914* (New York: Berghahn, 2007), p. 70.

leaving for a spa vacation, was a ploy to scare the civilians into granting a new army bill.²⁰ But once back in Berlin, Moltke said again on July 29, “We shall never hit it again so well as we do now with France’s and Russia’s expansion of their armies incomplete.”²¹

Ironically, across the border many French officers held the same view. The very next day a prominent French general wrote his son that “a better occasion would never be found” for war. French military attachés in St. Petersburg and Berlin echoed this sentiment.²² In the spring of 1913 the future French commander, Marshal Ferdinand Foch, had told his future British counterpart, Henry Wilson, that war should not be long delayed. Foch argued that under current circumstances, the war would arise over a Balkan squabble, so Russia would surely be a full participant, whereas Russia might stay aloof from a purely Franco-German contingency.²³ In April 1914 the Russian attaché in Paris wrote the chief of Russia’s General Staff, Nikolai Ianushkevich, that French power was peaking relative to Germany’s for demographic reasons.²⁴

Adding further irony to the paradox was the fact that 1914 was not a good time to initiate war for any of the continental powers, let alone all of them. Every offensive with which any of the continental powers began the war failed to achieve its tactical, strategic, or political objectives. Contrary to the teachings of the militarist cult of the offensive, prevailing technologies of firepower and mobility favored the side that fought on the defensive on thickly populated fronts. As a result, all of Europe’s powers would have had good prospects for maintaining their security if they had prepared to stay on the defensive and postponed the war, notwithstanding their different appraisals of relative power balances and trends in power.²⁵ The perverse bargaining assumptions that crippled diplomacy in 1914 need to be understood in terms of

20. Stig Förster, “Russische Pferde: Die Deutsche Armeeführung und die Julikrise 1914” [Russian horses: The German army leadership and the July crisis of 1914], in Christian Th. Müller and Matthias Rogg, eds., *Das ist Militärgeschichte! Probleme—Projekte—Perspektiven. Festschrift für Bernhard R. Kroener zum 65. Geburtstag* [That’s military history! Problems—projects—perspectives. Festschrift for Bernhard R. Kroener on his sixty-fifth birthday] (Paderborn, Germany: Verlag Ferdinand Schöningh GmbH, 2013), pp. 63–82.

21. Holger H. Herwig, “Imperial Germany,” in Ernest R. May, ed., *Knowing One’s Enemies: Intelligence Assessment before the Two World Wars* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1986), p. 94.

22. Marc Trachtenberg, “French Foreign Policy in the July Crisis, 1914: A Review Article,” *H-Diplo/ISSF*, No. 3, December 1, 2010, p. 8, <http://www.h-net.org/~diplo/ISSF/PDF/3-Trachtenberg.pdf>; and Stefan Schmidt, *Frankreichs Aussenpolitik in der Julikrise 1914* [France’s foreign policy during the July crisis of 1914] (Munich: Oldenbourg, 2009), pp. 209–210.

23. John C. Cairns, “International Politics and the Military Mind: The Case of the French Republic, 1911–1914,” *Journal of Modern History*, Vol. 25, No. 3 (September 1953), p. 276.

24. *Mezhdunarodnye Otnosheniia v Epokhu Imperializma*, series 3, Vol. 1, pp. 266–268, cited in D.C.B. Lieven, “Towards the Flame: Imperial Russia on the Road to War and Revolution,” University of Cambridge, 2014, chap. 7.

25. Jack Snyder, *The Ideology of the Offensive: Military Decision Making and the Disasters of 1914* (Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press, 1984), pp. 48–50, 130–132, 162.

biases in the underlying conceptual strategic framework that helped to cause the crisis in the first place and structured the evaluation of options within it.

Private Information

The simplest potential explanation for the simultaneous view of 1914 as a favorable year for war would be private favorable information that could not be safely or credibly shared with opponents. Such an argument, however, would not be convincing, because so much basic strategic information and many of the participants' assumptions were common knowledge across Europe's strategic elites. Still, a few possible lines of argument are worth considering.

Most key parameters of Europe's strategic situation were well known to Europe's militaries. France, Russia, and Britain knew the general outlines of the German war plan, though the French seem not to have understood Germany's decision to buttress the enveloping right wing with reservists.²⁶ French newspapers reported that the St. Cyr military academy had used a Schlieffen-type scenario for the cadets' 1913 final exam. In turn, the Germans knew that Russia had created a new army formation around Warsaw, poised for a quick attack toward Germany, in response to the Germans' abandonment of their eastward attack variant.²⁷ The Russians understood the Germans' motive and preparations for preventive war, having direct intelligence on this.²⁸ In fact, Russian War Minister Vladimir Sukhomlinov told the French attaché in February 1913 that "Germany is in a very critical position . . . encircled by enemy forces . . . and it fears them. . . . I can understand its worry, and as a result the measures it is taking seem natural to me."²⁹

This consensus was based on fairly good intelligence and common knowledge about military doctrinal assumptions. Historian Holger Herwig's well-documented study of German intelligence, for example, concludes that Germany based its estimate of military balance trends on detailed, accurate information. "The German sense of peril in 1914 is clearly not ascribable to defects in the system of collecting or analyzing intelligence," he observes. "To explain it, one has to look instead at the perceptual framework into which Germany's leaders set the information which reached them," such as the cult of the offensive, short-war dogma, and the tradition of preventive war thinking.³⁰

26. Herwig, "Imperial Germany," p. 70.

27. David Stevenson, *Armaments and the Coming of War: Europe, 1904–1914* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1996), pp. 359–360.

28. D.C.B. Lieven, *Russia and the Origins of the First World War* (London: Macmillan, 1983), p. 114.

29. Herrmann, *The Arming of Europe and the Making of the First World War*, pp. 191–192.

30. Herwig, "Imperial Germany," p. 72. For additional information on German intelligence, see

Other powers' prewar intelligence did not get everything right, but these errors did not matter much for the urge to preventive action, and they were not the result of private information. For example, Russian war planners assessing worst-case scenarios somewhat overestimated the size of the forces that Germany would leave in East Prussia. This misestimate, however, should have made Russia slightly less eager to go to war in 1914 rather than later, when it would have had more troops to mount an attack. In the event, Russia did attack East Prussia and lost the major battle that ensued.³¹

On a broader plane, a large historiographical debate assesses whether Germany expected Britain to stay out of the fight, and whether any misestimate in this regard might have affected Germany's decision to seek a preventive war against Russia. Even if this was Germany's expectation, it is difficult to chalk it up to private information, given that the British leadership did not know themselves what they were going to do until the final minute.³²

Stephen Van Evera has advanced the strongest theoretical argument linking private information to preemptive attack and preventive war in 1914.³³ Arguing more narrowly than Fearon, he notes that offensive plans can be especially reliant on surprise for success, placing a premium on secrecy—in other words, on private information. In particular, Van Evera argues that the Germans' extreme secrecy about their short-fuse plan to seize the Belgian bottleneck city of Liège left the Russians in the dark about the extremely tight connection between Russia's mobilization measures and general war. Although some recent historical scholarship holds that the Russians, goaded by the French, launched their mobilization knowing that it would lead to war, Van Evera's point remains worth debating historically and is strong theoretically.³⁴ It demonstrates yet another way in which underlying strategic assumptions about the cult of the offensive may have contributed to the 1914 paradox.

ibid., pp. 70–72; for further analysis of the Germans' strategic framework, see ibid., pp. 70–97, especially pp. 77, 91. See also Holger H. Herwig, "Germany and the 'Short-War' Illusion: Toward a New Interpretation?" *Journal of Modern History*, Vol. 66, No. 3 (July 2002), pp. 681–693, especially p. 688.

31. Bruce W. Menning, "The Offensive Revisited: Russian Preparation for Future War, 1906–1914," in David Schimmelpenninck van der Oye and Bruce W. Menning, eds., *Reforming the Tsar's Army: Military Innovation in Imperial Russia from Peter the Great to the Revolution* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004), p. 226.

32. Zara S. Steiner, *Britain and the Origins of the First World War* (New York: St. Martin's, 1977); and Dale C. Copeland, *The Origins of Major War* (Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press, 2000), pp. 60–64, 79, 84–85, 92–93, 111–112, 116.

33. Van Evera, "Why Cooperation Failed in 1914," pp. 103–106.

34. Sean McMeekin, *The Russian Origins of the First World War* (Cambridge, Mass.: Belknap, 2011), chaps. 1–2; and Christopher Clark, *The Sleepwalkers: How Europe Went to War in 1914* (New York: HarperCollins, 2013), chaps. 9, 11–12. On Van Evera's side, see Van Evera, "European Militaries and the Origins of World War I," in Rosecrance and Miller, *The Next Great War?* pp. 149–174; and

Commitment Problems

Even if Russia had wanted to, it might have been unable to credibly commit itself not to impose an intolerable bargain on Germany and Austria after the expected shift in power in its favor. This situation pushed the Central Powers toward preventive war and largely explains why they considered 1914 a good year for a showdown. This narrative can be accepted only with two major qualifications, however.

First, it does not explain why Germany retained the Schlieffen Plan framework that made Germany so vulnerable to Russian military improvements. Foreign Minister Jagow wanted to resurrect the old eastward mobilization plans of Helmuth von Moltke the Elder, a military genius whose plans for the 1880s envisioned holding the short, fortified Franco-German frontier with a defensive or counteroffensive deployment, carrying out pincer attacks around Russian-held Warsaw, and then negotiating.³⁵ This plan would probably have worked militarily and eased Jagow's and Bethmann's diplomatic problems, given that Germany would not have violated Belgian neutrality and brought Britain into the war. Moreover, without the British blockade, there would have been no unrestricted submarine warfare and no U.S. intervention to further tip the balance against Germany. Thus the notional Russian commitment problem could have caused World War I only in the perverse situation created by the Schlieffen Plan. In that sense, it demands a further theory to explain Germany's cult of the offensive.

Second, Russia's rising power does not explain why Russia and France accepted 1914 as the showdown year.³⁶ Indeed, as late as July 18, 1914, Jagow told Germany's ambassador in London that he expected the Russians to stay out of a localized skirmish between Austria and Serbia, because Russia and France would be better off delaying the big confrontation.³⁷ But not only did they accept the challenge in the seemingly disadvantageous year of 1914, they were eager to have it, because they were focused on a different commitment problem: their commitments to each other.

If the risk that the Franco-Russian alliance would fall apart was crucial to the timing calculations of France and Russia, why was it not just as critical

Annika Mombauer, *Helmuth von Moltke and the Origins of the First World War* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2001), pp. 185, 203–207, 211.

35. Mombauer, *Helmuth von Moltke and the Origins of the First World War*, pp. 6, 159, 285–286; and Snyder, *The Ideology of the Offensive*, pp. 116–119.

36. David Stevenson, "The European Land Armaments Race," in Afflerbach and Stevenson, *An Improbable War*, p. 139.

37. Stevenson, *Armaments and the Coming of War*, p. 374.

to Germany? Once Germany saw that France would support Russia in July 1914, why did it not pull back in the hope that a future crisis on a different issue might offer an opportunity to divide them? The answer lies not in information or in the inherent structure of the commitment problem, but in the conceptual framework that German strategy imposed on the problem. The military's Schlieffen Plan proceeded from the assumption that France and Russia would fight together and that any war that involved one of them would inevitably involve both. This frame largely ignored the fact that France and Russia had not supported each other in several crises from 1905 to 1911. Admittedly, this lack of mutual support resulted mainly from Russia's temporary military weakness. Once Russian power had rebounded, though, and France and Russia could begin to contemplate fighting, the Schlieffen Plan served as a self-fulfilling prophecy. The German deployment scheme would ensure that France and Russia would be cobelligerents in any Balkan contingency that embroiled Russia. This tendency of German strategy to drive France and Russia together was exacerbated by the tactical practices of some German diplomats, who erroneously believed that threatening Russia or France would strain their alliance to the breaking point.³⁸

These points are difficult to fit into Fearon's strictly rationalist version of the commitment problem. Two secondary points in his argument, however, can help to solve this puzzle: bounded rationality and the accumulation of power by territorial conquest.

Bounded Rationality and Bayesian Updating

Fearon notes that one possible explanation for "conflicting expectations of the likely outcome of military conflict" is that "the world is a very complex place, and for this reason military analysts in different states could reach different conclusions about the likely impact of different technologies, doctrines, and tactics on the expected course of battle."³⁹ If one adds to that the complexity of comparing the hypothetical outcomes of war now versus war four years hence, taking into account not only military factors but also the solidity of alliance commitments, it is hardly surprising that German, French, and Russian statesmen and strategists weighed uncertain factors differently and arrived at seemingly contradictory conclusions. Fearon accepts complexity as a plausible argument, but he sets it aside because it is a "bounded rationality" explanation. It is not

38. Glenn H. Snyder, *Alliance Politics* (Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press, 1997), p. 337.

39. Fearon, "Rationalist Explanations for War," p. 392.

one based on strict rationality, which accepts different actors producing systematically different estimates only if they have different information.⁴⁰

What happens, however, if the concept of Bayesian rationality is introduced?⁴¹ All of Europe's strategists engaged in updating their prior expectations about power balances and those balances' implications for commitment problems. This updating proceeded from some baseline expectations that Europe's militaries shared, such as a belief in the advantages of the offensive, but also some assumptions that diverged, especially as Germany and France were focused on completely different commitment problems.

In part, differences in national military culture and doctrinal training shaped the different prior assumptions that served as the baseline for updating. Preventive war thinking had a long, glorious tradition in the Prussian military, going back through Moltke the Elder to Frederick the Great.⁴² It is not surprising that German General Staff officers placed considerable weight on this form of rationality when thinking about how to incorporate new information about growing Russian military power. The content and weight of Bayesian priors in different countries may also have been influenced by whose opinion counted most, the soldiers' or the civilians'. New research on France's decision for war in 1914 places heavy emphasis on civilians, especially the militantly nationalist President Raymond Poincaré. His focus was not on trying to determine when Russian military power would peak, but on making sure that Russia fought on France's side. Beginning in 1912, he worked toward making France's diplomatic commitment to support Russia in the Balkans virtually unconditional.⁴³

This version of a Bayesian approach introduces all manner of cultural, organizational, and ideological biases in shaping baseline beliefs, which focus attention and frame questions differently as strategists integrate new information into their analyses. Thus Europe's strategists were updating their expectations from different baselines formed through processes of bounded rationality. This is no longer Fearon's strictly rational bargaining model, so he is right to exclude it from his theory. Still, it is important in explaining

40. *Ibid.*, pp. 392–393.

41. Bayes's theorem expresses how prior estimates of probability can be continually revised based on experience.

42. Alfred Vagts, *Defense and Diplomacy: The Soldier and the Conduct of Foreign Relations* (New York: King's Crown, 1956).

43. Sean McMeekin, *July 1914: Countdown to War* (New York: Basic Books, 2013), pp. 145–152; and Clark, *The Sleepwalkers*, pp. 190–197, 295–313, 438–505. On the role of alliances in moderating relations between allies, with a discussion of World War I, see Patricia A. Weitsman, *Dangerous Alliances: Proponents of Peace, Weapons of War* (Redwood City, Calif.: Stanford University Press, 2004), pp. 137–164.

why the European powers thought so differently about their commitment problems in 1914.

Forestalling the Power Shift

The other reason why Russia and France accepted Germany's challenge to a showdown in 1914 is that Germany and Austria might have been able to forestall the expected power shift through limited conquests in the Balkans and the creation of a sphere of influence around the Black Sea, if Russia and France did not act. In a digression on commitment, strategic territory, and appeasement, Fearon notes that "the objects over which states bargain frequently are themselves sources of military power."⁴⁴ Dan Reiter carries this thought to its logical conclusion: during the course of a war, the currently stronger but potentially weaker side may be able to conquer territory that serves as a power resource to diminish or neutralize the anticipated power shift.⁴⁵

Indeed, if the currently stronger power is strong enough, it might be able to extort such resources without fighting.⁴⁶ This is exactly what Jagow hoped to do in the event Russia abandoned its Serbian ally in 1914, an outcome that he said he preferred to preventive war. Following Reiter's argument, the question was whether the initially stronger power, Germany, could seize sufficient strategic assets to solve its problem of impending relative decline without having to embark on an all-out preventive war. In this sense, coercive diplomacy and limited war might have been a substitute for preventive war.⁴⁷

This is exactly how the Austrians and Germans analyzed the power competition in the Balkans. The Austrians in particular worried, for example, that Serbia's victories in the Balkan wars of 1912–13 had created a marginal but important power shift as a result of which "our forces will no longer be sufficient for both [Russia and Serbia] in the future."⁴⁸ Scheming to counteract these adverse trends, they calculated that Romania's sixteen and a half divisions, plus ten new Romanian reserve divisions to be added by 1916, would be a significant positive increment if allied to the Central Powers and kept out of alli-

44. Fearon, "Rationalist Explanations for War," p. 408.

45. Reiter, *How Wars End*, pp. 42–47.

46. This possibility is what Fearon says the declining state fears after the power transition.

47. Fearon, too, appears to be thinking along these lines. He notes that German leaders thought that Russia might accept Austrian demands, and suggests that this shows that the war may have been caused by private information, perhaps in conjunction with the preventive logic of a commitment problem. See Fearon, "Rationalist Explanations for War," pp. 407–408.

48. Blasius Schemua, Austria's chief of the General Staff, quoted in Herrmann, *The Arming of Europe and the Making of the First World War*, p. 178.

ance with the Entente. Germany's move in early 1914 to convince the Turks to install German Gen. Otto Liman von Sanders as the commander of Turkish troops in the Straits of Bosphorus was part of this same strategy to contain rising Russian power. If Germany and Austria could neuter Serbia, induce Romania to jump on their bandwagon, and make Turkey a client, Russia might be checked without resorting to a risky, all-out preventive war.⁴⁹ The Central Powers, however, had waited too long to push the showdown and the Entente had become stronger. Consequently they found out in August 1914 that permanently redressing the balance without a major war was no longer an option.

The Risk of Continental or World War

As Europe became divided into two more or less equally matched blocs, strategists and political leaders realized that their struggle for power and security carried the risk of a devastating war, the kind of costly war that Fearon notes states should be highly motivated to avoid through bargaining. Indeed, they were. But instead of leading toward compromise, the impetus to bargain led toward a competition in risk taking. Just as Thomas Schelling later argued that a nuclear stalemate could foster risky behavior in places such as Berlin to gain diplomatic leverage from a shared risk of escalation, so too Bethmann Hollweg's private secretary, Kurt Riezler, published a book in 1914 explaining that a great European war had become so potentially costly that no one would fight it, but that this very risk could be a source of diplomatic leverage in a crisis showdown.⁵⁰ Similarly, Adm. Alfred von Tirpitz justified building Germany's "risk fleet" not on the assumption that it would actually be used to defeat the British navy in open battle, but that it would deter Britain from taking the risk of mounting an effective close-in blockade of German ports, giving Germany a free hand to dominate France and Russia on the continent.⁵¹

As 1914 approached, all of the powers tried to ratchet up the risks in the game of coercive diplomacy. New historical writing sees the Russian "trial mobilization" during the Balkan crisis in the fall of 1912 as an attempt at coercive

49. Stevenson, *Armaments and the Coming of War*, pp. 352–356; Wohlforth, "The Perception of Power," p. 364; Herrmann, *The Arming of Europe and the Making of the First World War*, p. 207; and Paul W. Schroeder, "Romania and the Great Powers before 1914," *Revue Roumaine d'Histoire*, Vol. 14, No. 1 (1975), pp. 40–53, especially p. 46.

50. Thomas C. Schelling, *Arms and Influence* (New Haven, Conn.: Yale University Press, 1966); and Kurt Riezler [J.J. Ruedorffer, pseud.], *Grundzüge der Weltpolitik in der Gegenwart* [The primary features of contemporary world politics] (Stuttgart: Deutsche Verlags-Anstalt, 1914).

51. Paul Kennedy, "Tirpitz, England, and the Second Navy Law of 1900: A Strategic Critique," *Militär-geschichtliche Mitteilungen*, Vol. 2 (1970), pp. 33–58.

diplomacy to deter Austria from intervening against Russia's Balkan allies and to neutralize any Austrian attempt to intimidate them.⁵² Some argue that the Austrians learned from this crisis the importance of going to the brink while holding cards, such as the German blank check, that would allow them to call Russia's bluff.⁵³

Meanwhile the Russians became increasingly enamored of coercive diplomacy as a way to prevail without fighting. In the final year or two before the outbreak of the war, the tsar's cabinet faced mounting criticism from the many nationalist voices in the Duma who were demanding an end to Russia's weak diplomacy. The most powerful, dynamic figure in the cabinet, Agriculture Minister Alexander Krivoshein, argued for a firm policy of military deterrence as a way to reconcile the Russian government's inclination to avoid a premature war with these growing public demands.⁵⁴ In response, Russia's ambassador in London, Count Alexander von Benckendorff, warned that this policy of deterrent threats, backed by the encirclement of the Central Powers in the Entente's ever-tightening web, could cause German preventive aggression rather than deter it.⁵⁵ More commonly, notes Herwig, statesmen and soldiers in every European capital "perceived their own alternatives always as restricted by necessity or 'fate,'" whereas their opponents were seen as "being embarrassed by a plethora of open choices."⁵⁶

Structural features of the European strategic situation in 1914 set the stage for this decreasing suppleness of crisis diplomacy, but psychological, organizational, and domestic political factors added crucial complications. The thorny issue of the Turkish Straits, where the stakes came closest to being indivisible, illustrates this interplay of international structural and internal decisional factors.

Indivisibility of the Stakes

Of his three core mechanisms of bargaining failure, Fearon places the least stock in the indivisibility of the stakes. He points out that virtually any stakes can be made divisible by side payments or offsetting strategic compensation.

52. Clark, *The Sleepwalkers*, pp. 266, 269.

53. Samuel R. Williamson Jr., "Military Dimensions of Habsburg-Romanov Relations during the Era of the Balkan Wars," in Bela K. Kiraly and Dimitrije Djordjevic, eds., *War and Society in East Central Europe*, Vol. 18: *East Central European Society and the Balkan Wars* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1987), pp. 317–337.

54. Lieven, *Russia and the Origins of the First World War*; and Lieven, "Towards the Flame," chap. 7.

55. Lieven, "Towards the Flame," chap. 7, citing *Mezhdunarodnye Otnosheniia v Epokhu Imperializma*, series 3, Vol. 1, pp. 266–268, Benckdorff to Sazonov, January 15/28, 1914.

56. Herwig, "Imperial Germany," p. 93.

He agrees with subsequent empirical work that indivisibility, when it occurs, is more a social construction than a strategic fact.⁵⁷

Nonetheless, Russia did seem to face one of those rare dilemmas where a vital strategic asset really is hard to divide through a credible compromise. The Turkish Straits were a strategic position that was maddeningly difficult to divide, and this complicated bargaining in 1914. Three-fourths of Russia's grain exports were shipped through these straits. When they were closed to commercial shipping during the Italo-Turkish War in 1911, Russia suffered a 40 percent decline in its overall exports. Moreover, Russia was understandably concerned about the passage of foreign naval ships into the Black Sea. Indeed, reflagged German battleships nominally handed over to the Turks in August 1914 wreaked havoc on Russian Black Sea shipping. Conversely, Russia would have liked access to the Mediterranean for its own Black Sea fleet to project power and to protect its commerce. Although some Russians pointed out that holding the straits would make little difference unless the British fleet were allied to Russia and dominated the Mediterranean,⁵⁸ Russia still had compelling reasons to want to do so. Divided control, such as giving Russia control over the Bosphorus entrance to the Black Sea while giving another power control over the Dardanelles entrance to the Mediterranean, would not have solved Russia's main problem. Unless Turkey were friendly to Russia or a credible, favorable international straits regime were in place, Russia arguably faced an enormous incentive to seize the straits to prevent a strong, hostile power from doing so first.

This indivisibility created a security dilemma between the Russians and the Turks, and potentially between Russia and whoever else would seek to control the straits. Because the Turks did not want Russia to occupy this core position in their country, they sought to shore up their ability to defend the straits, contracting to purchase Dreadnought battleships abroad and inviting German Gen. Liman von Sanders to command their shore garrison. This situation constituted a security dilemma in the sense that anything that Turkey did to increase its security necessarily decreased the security of Russia, and vice versa.

Mirroring incentives for preventive action in Europe more generally, impending power shifts threatened to trigger offensive action to resolve the security dilemma in the straits. Russia saw its window of opportunity to seize the straits potentially closing as a result of rising German influence there and im-

57. Fearon, "Rationalist Explanations for War," p. 382; and Stacie E. Goddard, *Indivisible Territory and the Politics of Legitimacy: Jerusalem and Northern Ireland* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010), chap. 2.

58. Lieven, "Towards the Flame," chap. 7, p. 7.

pending Turkish battleship purchases, which Russia could not match because of the ban on foreign naval ships transiting the straits.⁵⁹ Russia was trying to build battleships on a round-the-clock construction schedule in its Crimean naval yards, but these would not be ready for a few years. As a result, the Russians itched to grab the straits preventively unless they could block the battleship purchases.

Ultimately, none of the issues above acted as a trigger to Russia's mobilization in 1914, because its naval staff realized by then that Russia lacked the ability to seize the straits before Turkey could bolster its own Black Sea fleet. The naval staff concluded that "what Russia desires in the next few years is a postponement of the final settlement of the Eastern Question and the strict maintenance of the status quo."⁶⁰ Once the war started, Britain blocked Turkey's battleship purchases, but Turkey accomplished the same goal through the reflagging of the German battleships that showed up in the Eastern Mediterranean.

Perceptual Bias in Assessing the Military Balance

Although the structural problem of the indivisibility of the Turkish Straits did not cause the war, the episode described above is nonetheless interesting as an example of the way power balances and shifts could be misperceived and misunderstood by European statesmen.

Russia's allies, to say nothing of its enemies, were loath to appreciate, let alone accommodate, the security dilemma that Russia faced in the straits. Most assumed that Russia's partial mobilization during the Balkan war in October–November 1912 was aimed at Austria, but it was also intended to deter or preempt a Bulgarian occupation of Constantinople. (The self-styled Bulgarian "tsar," Ferdinand, had a full-dress Ottoman emperor's regalia in his closet, made to order from a theatrical costume supplier, just in case his army occupied Constantinople and with it the straits.)⁶¹ Russia's allies were also reluctant to back its protests against the installation of Liman von Sanders as commanding officer in the straits. Further, diplomatic correspondence suggests that Britain may not have grasped that the sale of British-built Dreadnoughts would give Turkey superiority over Russia's Black Sea fleet.

59. Stevenson, *Armaments and the Coming of War*, pp. 348–349. As it turned out, the British impounded one of the battleships for their own use just before it was ready for delivery at the outset of the war.

60. *Ibid.*, p. 348; and Ronald Park Bobroff, *Roads to Glory: Late Imperial Russia and the Turkish Straits* (London: I.B. Tauris, 2006), p. 94.

61. McMeekin, *The Russian Origins of the First World War*, p. 25.

First Lord of the Admiralty Winston Churchill may have been clueless, or perhaps just devious, when he told the Russians not to worry about a Turkish purchase, because the ships would not affect the balance between Greece and Turkey, as if that were Russia's concern.⁶² Despite the long history of the straits being centrally tied to the general equilibrium of Europe, as war approached in 1914 this issue was discussed as if it were something of a sideshow, comparable, say, to Morocco for the French—a luxury item rather than a necessity.

Europe's powers appear to have had access to roughly similar information about the strategic contest over the straits. If they assessed its strategic significance differently, the cause was most likely a difference in perspective stemming from their different situations, not their information per se. Because Fearon was engaged in a theory-building exercise rather than trying to explain any one particular case, he made a sensible decision to restrict his analysis to rational hypotheses at the national level of analysis. But because my purpose is to understand the dynamic of 1914 in the light of this theory, it is necessary to consider other kinds of hypotheses as alternatives or supplements when rationalist accounts seem underdetermining.

For example, psychological mechanisms might have contributed to the 1914 timing paradox, whether in regards to the European dynamic as a whole or the straits problem in particular. Preventive war makes more sense when the opponent seems innately disposed toward exploitative behavior and thus seems highly likely to take aggressive advantage of the power shift in the future. The so-called fundamental attribution error in psychology describes a mechanism that could have biased all sides to hold this suspicion simultaneously. Laboratory research documents the common perceptual bias that people tend to explain their own actions in terms of situational causes (I had to do it because of the situational pressures that I faced), whereas they tend to explain others' actions in terms of dispositional causes (he did it because that is the kind of person he is). Although some observers might view this bias as rooted in self-justificatory ego defenses, cognitive psychologists typically contend that the different vantage points of actor and observer make situational accounts more available to the actor and dispositional accounts more salient to the observer.⁶³

In a strategically competitive relationship, this is likely to produce a systematically biased causal bookkeeping that could lead over time to an engrained perception of the other as innately disposed to be exploitative and hostile. As Robert Jervis noted in his seminal writings on the security dilemma and on

62. *Ibid.*, p. 40.

63. Richard E. Nisbett and Lee Ross, *Human Inference: Strategies and Shortcomings of Social Judgment* (Englewood Cliffs, N.J.: Prentice Hall, 1980).

strategic misperceptions, such perceptual biases make it difficult for an actor to understand how others can perceive his defensive acts as threatening and as intended to threaten.⁶⁴ These biases can also sustain the assumption that only the other side enjoys the latitude to swerve to avoid a collision. Finally, Jervis also notes the psychological bias to see the other side as more unified than it really is, which possibly helps to explain why the Schlieffen Plan took for granted that Russia and France would cooperate with each other in any war scenario.⁶⁵

Skeptics might point out that European diplomats in the multipolar era were schooled in the skills of imagining the complex motives and calculations of enemies and allies. Still, not everyone could rise to the level of Germany's famed chancellor, Otto von Bismarck, and research has shown how cognitive biases affected diplomatic attributions of motives in this period.⁶⁶ It seems possible that systematic biases of this kind might have been a background factor that could help to explain the perceptual focus on different strategic problems, divergent assessments of motives and options, and thus some aspects of the 1914 timing paradox.

Integration of Strategy and Implementation under Uncertainty

The institutional disunity of military policymaking and the organizational incoherence of strategic planning in the great powers sometimes produced different strategic assessments within countries, as well as between them. In all of the continental powers, civilian authorities had at best partial control over and knowledge of military strategy, and civilians and military officials sometimes sent different signals based on different strategic assumptions. Even the Austrians puzzled over who ruled in Berlin, Moltke or Bethmann? Historians today still say there is no simple answer.⁶⁷

Russian civilian and military decisionmakers had particularly diverse views and preferences regarding strategy. There was no single, strong leader who had the knowledge, authority, political influence, or coherent vision to integrate all of the diplomatic and military considerations that pulled in different

64. Robert Jervis, "Cooperation under the Security Dilemma," *World Politics*, Vol. 30, No. 2 (January 1978), pp. 167–214, especially pp. 181–182.

65. Robert Jervis, *Perception and Misperception in International Politics* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1976), pp. 319–328.

66. Jonathan Mercer, *Reputation and International Politics* (Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press, 1996).

67. Mombauer, *Helmuth von Moltke and the Origins of the First World War*, pp. 6, 159, 285–286. On Germany's "polycratic chaos," see John C.G. Röhl, "The Curious Case of the Kaiser's Disappearing War Guilt: Wilhelm II in July 1914," in Afflerbach and Stevenson, *An Improbable War*, p. 77.

directions. As a result, Russian policy lacked coherence in its changes over time and in its different components at any given time. Russia adopted a rearward, defense-minded concentration plan in 1910, and then proceeded to graft onto it an incompatible, overcommitted plan for multipronged offensives in every direction: toward Turkey, Austria, East Prussia, and Berlin itself. These grafts resulted in part from changes in the strategic balance and intelligence on Germany's strategy, but they also reflected bureaucratic compromises in which different military commands each got the offensives that they wanted.⁶⁸

More generally, the weakly led collectivity of civilian ministers and military dignitaries who made Russian strategy could not deliberate coherently to produce consistent strategic priorities, including when would be the favorable moment for war. Governmental decisionmaking over partial mobilization in 1912 and over the military and diplomatic response to the Liman von Sanders crisis was highly factionalized. Clarity of a sort emerged only in February 1914 when a geriatric nonentity, Ivan Goremykin, replaced the leader of the less bellicose faction, Vladimir Kokovtsov, as chairman of the council of ministers. Under this new arrangement, advocates of urgent military preparation, led informally by Agriculture Minister Krivoshein, forged a consensus in favor of firm deterrence of any further Austro-German moves.⁶⁹ As in the logroll among Russia's military factions, the compromise among civilian leadership factions resolved internal disputes through the fiction that a synthesis of different factional viewpoints would solve Russia's strategic problems. Thus one reason why Europe's states worked from contradictory strategic assumptions is that they were focused as much on their own internal political realities as on strategic assessments.

Another institutional mechanism that affected the feeling of readiness for war in 1914 was each military organization's inclination to reduce operational uncertainty through preparations to carry out its own plan at the outset of the conflict.⁷⁰ When a military organization makes strategic calculations, a highly

68. Snyder, *The Ideology of the Offensive*, pp. 165–188. Bruce W. Menning presents an updated version of this argument, with nuanced archival information. See Menning, "Pieces of the Puzzle: The Role of Iu. N. Danilov and M.V. Alekseev in Russian War Planning before 1914," *International History Review*, Vol. 25, No. 4 (December 2003), pp. 775–798. See also Menning, "The Offensive Revisited," pp. 224, 230, which exploits archival sources, concluding that "the ideology of the offensive," decentralized military planning, and weaknesses in implementing reforms all contributed to the emergence of war plans that "failed to deal adequately with issues of time, mass, and space." In contrast, Fuller, *Strategy and Power in Russia, 1600–1914*, p. 443, acknowledges that the multiple offensives of 1914 stretched Russia's capacity to its limits. He blames their failure, however, on poor implementation rather than on any inherent flaw in the plans, and he warns against exaggerating the role of bureaucratic politics in determining the outcome.

69. McMeekin, *The Russian Origins of the First World War*, pp. 58–59, 95–97; Clark, *The Sleepwalkers*, pp. 271–272, 473–474; and Lieven, "Towards the Flame."

70. Barry R. Posen, *The Sources of Military Doctrine: France, Britain, and Germany between the World Wars* (Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press, 1984), pp. 47–48.

salient marker seems to be whether the military feels that it is coherently organized to implement its basic plan from an administrative, logistical point of view, and whether its basic force structure is in place for the plan. This sets an absolute rather than a relative milestone. It is about whether the state is ready, not whether it is more ready than the opponent or more ready than it will be in the future.

All of the European militaries felt operationally “ready” in this sense in 1914, whereas one or more had felt egregiously unready in earlier showdowns. In 1914, Russian staff officers were, for good reason, somewhat nervous about the logistics of the East Prussia operations once the troops got off the trains, but as recently as the fall of 1912, the worries were more basic: Were there enough bullets, would the trains run on time, and so on?⁷¹ Herrmann states flatly that Russian mobilization was “impossible” in the 1909 Bosnia crisis; in 1914 it was not.⁷² Further, Dominic Lieven has argued that Russia was “not radically less prepared for war in 1914 . . . than [it would be] in the next few years.”⁷³ Thus, looking at the balance comparatively and prospectively, Russian War Minister Sukhomlinov could conclude that Russia would remain inferior to the combination of Germany and Austria until 1917 or 1918. At about the same time, assessing preparedness on an immediate, can-we-do-our-job basis, he could declare in 1914 that the Russian army was ready for the big war.⁷⁴ This self-referential preparedness illusion may have had both institutional and psychological sources, such as the greater salience of first-hand impressions.⁷⁵

Domestic and International Public Relations

Another factor that heightened the self-absorption of calculations of the best moment for war was each power’s need to create the appearance of being the aggrieved party, especially in the eyes of its own public.

Germany and France, in particular, were each concerned about appearing to be the wronged party in the eyes of its domestic public audience. Because of the Schlieffen Plan, France could always count on this, though a seemingly

71. Fuller, *Strategy and Power in Russia, 1600–1914*, p. 450.

72. Herrmann, *The Arming of Europe and the Making of the First World War*, p. 214.

73. Lieven, *Russia and the Origins of the First World War*, p. 114.

74. Wohlforth, “The Perception of Power,” p. 368; Stevenson, *Armaments and the Coming of War*, pp. 238–239; and McMeekin, *The Russian Origins of the First World War*, p. 404. On the alliance dimension of the readiness question, and for hard-to-prove speculations about hidden motives behind Sukhomlinov’s claims, see Ernest R. May, “Cabinet, Tsar, Kaiser,” in May, *Knowing One’s Enemies*, p. 23.

75. Snyder, *The Ideology of the Offensive*, pp. 197–198.

gratuitous German attack on France arising from a Balkan contingency was probably seen as a bonus, and thus a good occasion for war. For Germany, looking like the aggrieved party could hardly be taken for granted, given the blank check to Austria. Once the Russians moved to mobilize first, however, this problem was miraculously solved in a way that might not recur in hypothetical future showdowns. As Dale Copeland shows in detail, many of Bethmann Hollweg's delays and maneuvers in the final days of the July 1914 crisis can be understood at least in part as attempts to win the blame game in the eyes of peace-minded German Social Democrats.⁷⁶

Understandably, each power was more focused on its own domestic justification problem than that of its neighbor. Looking blameless in the eyes of one's own public seemed advantageous even if the opponent's regime also looked blameless in the eyes of its public. Not all statesmen are self-absorbed in this way, however. In 1870, for example, Bismarck was able to view this problem from all parties' perspective in devising his strategy for making France appear to be the aggressor. Few leaders are as deft as Bismarck, however. The mean reverts toward self-referential perception and thus may help to explain the paradox of multiple, simultaneous optimism about war now relative to war later.

Conclusion

James Fearon's rational bargaining theory of war is strong as theory, and theory must always simplify to maintain its generalizability. The simple explanations drawn directly from the theory, however, do not in themselves yield adequate explanations for the puzzle of how France, Germany, and Russia could have all been simultaneously convinced that 1914 was a favorable time for war. Private information was only a problem at the margins. The commitment problem caused by shifting power balances was far more important, but it was driven not by an inexorable structural dilemma but by the social construction of vulnerability as a result of the cult of the offensive in military doctrine and war planning. Specific issue indivisibilities, notably the Turkish Straits dilemma, did not cause the war, whereas the generic notion of an all-encompassing indivisibility, such as the *Weltpolitik* mantra of world power or decline, was a tenet of ideology rather than a structural fact.⁷⁷

Although the basic hypotheses of rational bargaining theory seem inade-

76. Copeland, *The Origins of Major War*, chap. 4.

77. Isabel V. Hull, *Absolute Destruction: Military Culture and the Practices of War in Imperial Germany* (Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press, 2005).

quate to explain the puzzle of why Europe went to war in 1914, perceptual, organizational, and domestic political spinoffs of these bargaining problems do seem helpful in pointing toward possible answers. Europe's statesmen and strategists tried to reason about the strategic consequences of the balance of power, its trend, and its relationship to the cohesiveness of alliances. They reasoned differently, however, because of self-absorption in their distinctive strategic problems and domestic audiences, and because of different baseline beliefs that served as frames for updating their calculations in light of new, often shared information.

While several aspects of the strategic and political situation of 1914 contributed to the paradox of simultaneous urgency for war, three are worth highlighting. The first is William Wohlforth's permissive condition of the relatively even balance of power, which made it possible for each power to envision conditions under which it could win or lose. This permissive condition established the potential for both optimism about victory now and pessimism about defeat later.

The second is Stephen Van Evera's arguments about the cult of the offensive leading inexorably to preventive war. The offense cult magnified the consequences of power shifts for commitment problems, exacerbated what would have been minor problems of private information, and fed notions of cumulative conquest that made any division of resources and strategic assets look inherently unstable. The belief in the offensive was not grounded in strategic realities. Instead, it was an outgrowth of the organizational interests of Europe's military organizations at a peak period of their narrow professionalization and organizational autonomy in an era when civilian institutions of military oversight were poorly developed. As Holger Herwig has put it, "To concede that the vaunted Prussian General Staff could no longer conduct short wars of annihilation was to admit that war had ceased to be a viable option for the state."⁷⁸ Stig Förster concurs: "The 'demigods' inside the General Staff simply could not afford to accept . . . that war had ceased to be a viable option of policy. Otherwise, not only they but also the whole army would lose their elevated position in German society."⁷⁹ More broadly, the cult of the offensive reflected the widespread nationalism that was endemic to that era of European history, highlighting not only the anarchical competition of nation-states at a time of uneven growth, but also the domestic political strategies of elites who

78. Herwig, "Germany and the 'Short-War' Illusion," p. 688.

79. Stig Förster, "Dreams and Nightmares: German Military Leadership and the Images of Future Warfare, 1871–1914," in Manfred F. Boemeke, Roger Chickering, and Förster, eds., *Anticipating Total War: The German and American Experiences, 1871–1914* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999), p. 360.

used nationalism to survive in the face of the class conflicts of that phase of social modernization.

This directs attention to a third general factor: the focus of European political elites on their own nation's social divisions, factional complexities, and ramshackle governmental arrangements, and on their own tenuous legitimacy. Bargaining with enemies competed with the need to maintain bargains with domestic coalitions and allies. As a result, grand strategy in this era was a three-level game in which the need to cobble together working coalitions on the domestic and alliance levels often seemed more pressing than even the life-and-death threats posed by foreign competitors. Despite sharing a great deal of common knowledge of strategic matters, enemies could not reach a diplomatic compromise because they were hindered by domestic or intra-alliance bargains that were rationalized by strategic fictions tied to nationalism and the cult of the offensive.

How should these insights from the 1914 timing paradox inform thinking about the future power transition that might result from China's economic and geopolitical rise? An overly simple realist take on this problem might expect the rising power to lie low until it becomes the stronger party, while the relatively declining party decides whether to launch an all-out preventive war before the crossover point is reached. The 1914 example suggests that the dynamics of a power transition are likely to be more complicated. The declining power is likely to try to prevent the transition through territorial containment, alliances with regional states, control over economic and military choke points, and coercive means short of major war. This likelihood might place the onus on the rising power to sustain its rise through brinkmanship, arms racing, and efforts to break out of hostile encirclement through coercive diplomacy.

In this process, secondary windows of opportunity might come to dominate thinking about the best timing for a showdown. These might include calculations of alliance solidarity (e.g., an opportunity for the United States created by a moment when Japan and South Korea are cooperating or, conversely, an opportunity for China to exploit an episodic rift between the United States and Taiwan); the need to forestall impending nuclear weapons proliferation (by Japan, South Korea, or Taiwan), which could give both China and the United States a simultaneous incentive to hasten a showdown; an impending Taiwanese declaration of national sovereignty; or the interaction of a perceived first-strike advantage with a security dilemma on the Korean Peninsula resulting from the collapse of the North Korean regime. Such secondary windows of opportunity could spur China to act "too soon" in the trajectory of its rise.

In such situations, bargaining failures could lead to a costly war not only through simple problems of private information, commitment dilemmas, and

indivisibility. Strategic and bargaining calculations are likely to diverge also because of the various states' distinctive strategic cultures, their inordinate focus on their own alliance dilemmas, their self-absorbed military organizational habits and concerns, the pressing domestic political implications of their international stances, and systematic differences in causal attributions by actors and observers of action. Although today's world differs in many ways from 1914, any of these general mechanisms might still trigger the paradoxical conclusion that fighting a war now seems better for all parties than waiting for war to come later. It is the task of students of strategic theory and history to be prepared to challenge the kind of assumptions that lock strategists into that mind-set.