

The Steps to War: An Empirical Study.

By Paul D. Senese and John A. Vasquez.

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This book is the capstone of a long collaboration of the two authors, and presents a series of statistical analyses designed to evaluate hypotheses derived from the “steps-to-war” explanation for war developed by Vasquez. This explanation is a self-conscious opponent to realism and posits that (i) for variety of reasons human beings, and by extension states, are intensely territorial, that (ii) states tend to handle territorial claims through *Realpolitik* policies (arming, forming alliances), that (iii) the repeated use of these coercive tactics produces a security dilemma (both sides become more fearful and hostile), and that (iv) the steps involved at each stage eventually lead to war rather than peace. Contra Vegetius (and Reagan), if try to obtain peace by preparing for war, you will get war.

The authors first counter two criticisms of the influence of territoriality on the likelihood of war. Could it be that territoriality is more likely to cause militarized disputes (MIDs) but is no more, or even less, likely to cause a MID to escalate to war? The authors find that territorial claims not only make MIDs more likely but also destabilize them (within a five-year window), and reject the selection bias hypothesis. It would have been nice if the authors also dealt with omitted variable bias (aggressive nationalist leaders who want conflict are also more likely to use territorial claims as pretext) or endogeneity (leaders who anticipate war use territorial claims to consolidate domestic support for their war policies).

In Chapter 4 the authors take on the idea that states cannot fight unless they can get at each other, which means that wars will tend to occur among geographically proximate, or contiguous, states. To see whether territory is just a proxy for contiguity, the authors estimate the effect of both variables and find that while contiguity does increase the likelihood of MID onset, it reduces the probability of war. Territoriality, on the other hand, increases the chances of war, and does even more so for noncontiguous dyads. In other words, it is not the opportunity to fight but the territorial grievances that destabilize disputes.

Having dealt at length with the question of how territory relates to the probability of war, the authors turn to the relationship that is more central to their explanation: the relationship between power politics and war. Chapter 5 tests the idea that the more “steps” to war occur in a given dyadic interaction, the more likely is each subsequent dispute to end in a war. The authors look at the entire history of a dyad and note whether its members have (i) politically relevant external alliances, (ii) have engaged in repeated disputes with each other, or (iii) have experienced an

arms race, and then assess whether dyads who have more of the three possible “steps” are more likely to experience war. I am not sure what to make of the results because this coding ignores temporal sequencing: a dyad that has experienced war in the past and as a result is now arming or concluding alliances causing a new MID to end peacefully would be coded the same as a dyad that has armed and allied in the past and *then* gone to war.

Chapter 6 attempts a more direct approach by asking whether the presence of these *Realpolitik* factors within a MID dyad make the MID more likely to escalate to war. The potential for endogeneity is greatest here, especially when it comes to arming and forming alliances: do they “cause” war (as the authors contend) or are they failed attempts to prevent war? To put it another way, do these actions create a security dilemma or are they what states do when they expect to have to fight a war? The authors find that the occurrence of war is correlated, at least in the pre-Cold War period, with both sides having alliances and being in an arms race, which makes one wish they had tackled the question of reverse causality head on. Chapter 7 is essentially a series of robustness checks where authors run various permutations of variables to test for the presence of interactive effects. It is difficult to say whether this adds much to their analysis because there is no theory to guide the choice of variables to interact and how to do it.

While it is true that the main purpose of the authors here is to test the steps-to-war explanation, I would have preferred to have an expanded treatment of the theory. For instance, it is not obvious to me how MIDs escalate to war. Like the security dilemma on which it is based, the steps-to-war explanation does not specify agency – who makes the decisions that lead to war, and why. There are spirals of increasing hostility and mutual alarm but never a decision to start fighting. Statements like “eventually a crisis goes out of control [through] some stochastic process” (p.30) are symptomatic. I do not know of any stochastic process that can start a war, but the lack of agency might be a problem with empirics as well: the MID data set, on which the study relies, defines a militarized dispute on the basis of acts that are “explicit, overt, nonaccidental, and government sanctioned.”

The authors assert that “since at least 1648, realist thinking and practice have created an ideal system that guides diplomats and tells them when to handle certain situations by a resort to arms.” One wants to know how such knowledge is institutionalized and transmitted, especially given the wildly diverse cultural, ideological, and economic background of policymakers across countries and time. One further wants to know how such a system perpetuates itself when “it underestimates how many of the policies it recommends to avoid war actually backfire and make war more likely” (32–33). For nearly four centuries diplomats have followed policies that universally make war more likely, they never saw this, or if they did, they never learned from their mistakes?