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Causes of War: Power and the Roots of Conflict

Thomas G. Mahnken

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BOOK REVIEWS

Master Theory of the Causes of War

Van Evera, Stephen. *Causes of War: Power and the Roots of Conflict*. Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell Univ. Press, 1999. 270pp. \$35

STEPHEN VAN EVERA, AN ASSOCIATE PROFESSOR of political science at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology, claims to offer a “master theory” explaining the causes of war. He also seeks to provide policy prescriptions to show soldiers and statesmen how to make conflict less likely. It is a lofty aim, but the book falls far short of its mark.

Causes of War is a revision of part of a fifteen-year-old dissertation that must rank among the most widely cited unpublished works in history. It is a work of social science in which Van Evera takes great care to observe all the methodological conventions of the field. The resulting volume is thus of greater interest to students and professors than to soldiers and statesmen. It is, at its core, a book about formulating and testing hypotheses. It is organized around five hypotheses: (1) “war is more likely when states fall prey to false optimism about its outcome,” (2) “war is more likely when the advantage lies with the first side to mobilize or attack,” (3) “war is more likely when the relative power of states fluctuates sharply,” (4) “war is more likely when the control of resources enables the protection or acquisition of other resources,” and (5) “war is more likely when conquest is easy.”

Van Evera devotes the first four chapters to his first four hypotheses. These chapters collectively offer a useful survey of how power, and perceptions of it, can create incentives for war. At times, however, the book’s search for a “master theory” clashes with the demands of careful scholarship. In some cases, Van Evera cites evidence that

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supports his hypotheses while omitting equally persuasive facts contradicting them. Elsewhere, he draws upon ambiguous or contradictory cases, and he frequently makes assertions without corroboration. He claims, for example, that while striking first rarely confers a battlefield advantage, leaders often operate under the illusion that it does. He offers no basis for this conclusion but merely lists cases that he believes support it. Moreover, the cases he examines in depth—World War I, China's entry into the Korean War, and the 1967 Arab-Israeli War—are at best ambiguous with respect to this issue.

The heart of the book examines the hypothesis that war is more likely when conquest is easy—in other words, when the offense is at a marked advantage. Van Evera argues that his formulation of offense-defense theory offers the master key that unlocks the causes of war. It is, however, little more than a reread of models that grew during the Cold War out of nuclear deterrence theory and the study of the origins of World War I. There is scant evidence that statesmen actually decide to start wars because of a perceived offensive advantage. There is one possible exception, World War I, and Van Evera milks it for all it is worth. There is, however, something methodologically suspect about using a case to prove a theory that grew out of a study of that very case.

Thucydides believed that states go to war for reasons of fear, honor, and self-interest. Van Evera apparently dismisses the third explanation; it appears nowhere in his hypotheses. Implicit in the overall argument is the assumption that states can never use war as a rational instrument to achieve political objectives. In fact, however, throughout history statesmen have found war preferable to other outcomes, and not merely due to misperception.

The book's final chapter, which discusses nuclear strategy, is the weakest—indeed, it seems out of place. It is a polemic against ballistic missile defense, and one distinguished by assertion rather than argumentation. Whatever one's view of national missile defense, there are thoughtful cases to be made on both sides of the issue. These are entirely absent from this book. What appears instead is a regurgitation of Cold War views about nuclear deterrence, arguments that are by now worn and frayed.

Thomas G. Mahnken
Naval War College