

Barry R. Posen, *The Sources of Military Doctrine* (New York: Cornell University press, 1984)
Review by Solomon Major, Friday, March 10, 2000

Quick Summary: Posen seeks to define the primary determinants of states' military doctrines—which he simplifies to mean either “offensive” or defensive” postures. He tests four possible explanatory variables: technology, geography, organization theory, and structural realism. Although he finds that the first two can marginally influence doctrine (often in combination with other variables), he believes that the latter explanations are more likely to explain states' adherence to offense or defensive strategies. His book develops into a two-horse race between orgs. theory and realism—endogenous and exogenous determinants of foreign policy—to see which is the primary determinant of military postures. Posen posits that, because organizations seek to reduce uncertainty, increase autonomy and budgets, they will favor offensive doctrines. However, *realpolitik* considerations drive politicians' perceptions of optimal policy; as their environment changes so too will their preference for a defensive or offensive strategy. Posen argues that, to the extent we see offensive doctrines in the face of conflicting exogenous factors, we will find evidence for orgs. On the other hand, when we see exogenous forces providing incentives for defensive strategies, and such doctrines are implemented over the wishes of the military organizations, we will find evidence for realism. (Offensive strategies in offensive dominant environments are over-specified.) After testing this hypothesis against several inter-war European countries, Posen finds that the preponderance of the evidence supports structural realism.

What is the central puzzle?

Posen seeks to answer the question of whether endogenous or exogenous factors represent the primary determinants of countries' foreign and military policies. He has operationalized internal variables with orgs, theory; structural variables with neorealism. Watch out for a case selection bias (the cases represent a “hard test” for both theories?), p. 38.

What is the central answer(s)?

Posen finds that both orgs. and structural realism have significant influence on states' foreign policies. In fact, during periods of *low threat*, military organizations are often relatively free to create their own strategies and doctrines. Civilians often believe that, when such circumstances prevail, their energies are better spent on issues other than military oversight. However, during periods of *crisis*, civilians are most often able to insinuate themselves into the planning of military strategy. In such cases, civilian preferences, founded on *realpolitik* considerations, trump organizational proclivities.

Posen believes that one can operationalize and test organization hypotheses according to the following operational expectations:

Offensive Bias

1. Because offensive strategies often cost more (larger budgets); allow general staffs to fight their own wars rather than reacting to attacks by others (reduces uncertainty); and reduces civilian involvement—civilians would more necessarily be involved when the battle lines are on home soil rather than far afield—(increases autonomy); militaries will almost always push for offensive strategies.
2. Because military officers often hold information asymmetries with regard to their civilian “overseers,” we should expect them to use their advantage to get their way (offensive strategies).

Lack of Innovation

1. Again, organizations seek to reduce uncertainty. The best way to do this is to repeat well-worn standard operating procedures (SOPs) regardless of their applicability to a given situation.
2. Although there are incentives to innovate, they are often felt by those who seek to *use* the military instrument, not by those who constitute it. As organizations have proprietary information on what innovations are likely to work; we should expect them to use their advantage to get their way (reduce innovation).

Posen believes that one can operationalize and test neorealism according to the following operational expectations:

Environment Determines Offense-Defense Posture

1. Because politicians have *realpolitik* incentives to pay attention to the opportunities and constraints of the IR system, we should expect them to undertake offensive strategies when they are expected to pay, but to hold preferences for defensive strategies when faced by superior forces (or coalitions).
2. Unitary actor models “black box” the state. Although all sorts of variables (including principal-agent information asymmetries) go into policy making, we expect policies *ex ante* determined to be (reasonably) rational to come out the other end.

Innovation When It Serves To Bring Ends Into Harmony With Means

1. Posen believes that we should, according to neorealism, expect to see civilians pushing for organizational innovation when it will allow them to better accomplish their political prerogatives (e.g. offensive minded politicians should champion doctrinal innovations that make the offense more potent, defensive minded politicians will seek to make their defenses more robust).
2. Despite organizational incentives to maintain traditional SOPs, civilians will find ways to overcome information asymmetries and organizational intransigence to get their way in instituting innovations. One tactic, noted by Posen, is to promote “mavericks” from within the organization who’s goals approximate those of the politicians.

The Test: Orgs vs. Structural Realism

Posen argues that, to the extent we see offensive doctrines in the face of conflicting exogenous factors, we will find evidence for orgs. On the other hand, when we see exogenous forces providing incentives for defensive strategies, and such doctrines are implemented over the wishes of the military organizations, we will find evidence for realism. After testing this hypothesis in cases involving inter-war France, England, and Germany, Posen finds that the preponderance of the evidence supports structural realism, although there remains significant evidence to support orgs., at least on the margin.