

# Summary of "exploding the powder keg myth" essay sample

[War](#)



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## Summary of “ Exploding the Powder Keg Myth” Essay Sample

- Existing argument: Preemption is most likely path to armed conflict (Int'l system as primed powder keg, waiting for single spark to explode into war) BUT these claims have not been matched by extensive empirical scholarship, has not been proven. Reiter's Argument:

- Empirical finding: preemptive wars almost never happen; in cases where they did happen, it was due to other motivations for war + conditions hypothesized to lead to preemptive war e. g. belief in military advantage of acting first → factors leading to preemptive wars are insubstantial causal forces Definition of preemptive war, its place in academic theories on causes of war & role in policy debates

- Definition: Preemption is a scenario for war predicted by some theories; war that breaks out when attacker feels that itself will be target of a military attack in the short term and motivated by fear. (Perception of short term threat to national security) • Preemptive war is a central prediction of the spiral model of war and an important component of offense-defense theory, two leading theories of the causes of war. 1. Spiral model: Explains the dynamics of international crises – preemptive war is the predicted outcome of a spiral in a crisis, after tensions spiral to the point where one believes the other is about to attack and hence strikes first pre-emptively. Hypothesis: preemptive wars become more likely when states believe that other states are hostile and pose imminent military threats 2. Offense-defense balance:

Argues that wars are more likely when the offense is perceived to have relative advantage on the battlefield.

Central argument scholars make when discussing how perceived offense dominance can cause crises to escalate to war - useful explanation for why states with essentially defensive foreign policy aims can stumble into war • Preemption as an important concern in policy debates - e. g. How war could have broke out in Europe during the Cold War • Jervis: Although nuclear war might break out due to a variety of factors, the last step in almost all of them would be preemption • Certain weapons and strategies could increase chances of preemption during a crisis e. g. battlefield nuclear weapons, counterforce weapons and targeting strategies etc Evidence for Reiter's claim that preemptive wars almost never happen

- View that has best historical supporting evidence: Preemptive wars are infrequent • Empirical finding: Preemptive wars almost never happen with only 3 out of 67 wars on the COW (Correlates of War) data set being preemptive: WWI Russo-German interactions in July 1914, Chinese intervention in the Korean War 1950 and Israeli attack on Egypt in 1967. • Case discussion demonstrated that even in these 3 cases of war, preemption was not the primary motive 1. 1967 Arab-Israel war: Egypt's mobilization and deployment of troops into the Sinai and closing of the Straits of Tiran (crucial waterway for Israeli shipping) convinced the Israelis that an attack was imminent → Israel seized the military advantage and struck first Argument against preemptive war: Israel had important motives for war - closure of the Straits had important political and economic implications for Israel + Israel's

preemptive attack came later than preemptive theories would predict as they delayed military action due to concerns about the political repercussions of taking preemptive action (deference to US pressure to avoid war) which should not be a factor to consider in preemptive war

2. WWI: Russian decision were not preemptive; did not fear Austria and was instead motivated by the desire to maintain an extended deterrent over Serbia Germans were also adverse to preemption as they wanted opponent to strike first so that responsibility for war would be held by opponent; motivated by political considerations which delayed preemptionà did not automatically respond to incremental Russian moves with hostile actions.