

The Viability of Non-Offensive Defense as a Strategy for National Security

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Abstract:

This essay explores viable non-offensive defense strategies through conventional deterrence in the context of the post-Cold War environment. The concept of non-offensive defense will be defined before examining key factors that determine how defense strategies are formulated, providing the framework for articulating the viability of non-offensive strategies and how they are practiced in the real world. Non-offensive defense can be a viable strategy for national security if conditions are permissive. If a state is endowed with defensible terrain (physical and human), has no immediate threats, and is of no interest to more powerful states, it can afford to implement a non-offensive defense strategy.

Keywords: Deterrence; Grand Strategy; Military Posture; National Security

INTRODUCTION

Non-offensive defense can be a viable strategy for national security if conditions are permissive. The three factors to consider are physical geography, strategic environment and the strategic importance of the state to great powers. If a state is endowed with defensible terrain (physical and human), has no immediate threats, and is of no interest to more powerful states, it can afford to implement a non-offensive defense strategy.

In reality, such conditions exist and there are states with defense strategies that can be considered non-offensive in substance: Switzerland, Norway and New Zealand. Thus far, their strategies have served the fundamental interest of those states—defending the sovereignty of the state against the threat of invasion. There are even “extreme” manifestations of non-offensive defense strategy in which “normal” states possess only nominal or no

military forces—such as Costa Rica, Liechtenstein, Monaco, Vatican and the South Pacific island states.

For the purpose of this essay, the arguments for viable non-offensive defense strategies are limited to conventional deterrence, and are made in the context of the post-Cold War environment. It first establishes the concept of non-offensive defense before examining key factors that determine how defense strategies are formulated. This provides the conceptual framework for articulating the viability of non-offensive strategies and how they are practiced in the real world. The arguments are constructed from the operational world view of a Neoclassical Realist. If non-offensive defense strategies can be admissible and viable from the Conservative Realist perspective, such strategies will have greater traction under the Liberal paradigm where cooperation and interdependence are normative values of the system.

CONCEPT OF NON-OFFENSIVE DEFENSE

A non-offensive defense strategy is one that provides a state with sufficient means to defend itself without threatening another state. Political intentions and military doctrine need to be examined together in order to determine the “offensiveness” of a defense strategy.¹ The force structure of the military alone is insufficient in determining the nature of a defense strategy. Gray argues that policy determines whether weapons serve offensive or defensive functions.² This is because weapons are inherently offensive in nature; even a shield can be used to inflict blunt trauma if thrown at an opponent.

A defense strategy can be considered offensive if the policy goal is hegemonic—such as seeking global leadership,³ reinforced by a doctrine that is explicit in using force to back demands, and is enabled by a force structure capable of projecting power over distance. Likewise, a state’s security strategy can be considered purely defensive or non-offensive if the state has no ambition of projecting influence beyond its sovereign borders, and practices a military doctrine that is consistent with its policy goals.

Even if a defensive security strategy seeks to deter aggression—there are nuanced differences in the level of offensiveness in deterrence strategies—does it deter by denial, or does it deter by punishment?⁴ The tone of offense in a state’s defense strategy can be evaluated by examining (1) its articulation of security policy goals in defense white paper or official statements (expressed intentions) and (2) its military order of battle (practiced doctrines). How the regime of the day formulates the state’s security strategy

is shaped by its strategic culture, which is informed by geography and history.⁵

KEY CONSIDERATIONS FOR SECURITY STRATEGY

The more secure the state feels, the less aggressive it needs to be to deter external aggression.

Threat perception is a subjective function of strategic culture and influences a state’s security strategy. Excluding the particularities of culture, “space” and “time” are fundamentally more objective variables that color this perception. The primacy of geography (space) and subjective historical experience (time) shapes how a state makes policies and ensures security.⁶ The following three factors should be considered during the formulation of national security policy: (1) Geography—is the state naturally defensible? (2) Strategic Environment—are there any clear and present threats in the immediate neighborhood? Has there been a history of violent conflict between the state and neighbors? What are the normative values of the international order? (3) Interest of Great Powers—is the state a strategic object that is critical to or coveted by great powers? These are the key considerations for a state when formulating its external security policies. The more secure the state feels, the less aggressive it needs to be to deter external aggression. The three considerations will determine the viability of non-offensive defense strategies.

DEFENSIBLE GEOGRAPHY

The physical and human geography of a state constitutes the first line of defense. The physical geography is the foundational layer of security. Borders defined by natural obstacles such as water bodies and mountainous topography serve



A US Air Force F-4E-40-MC Phantom II flies off the right wing of a Norwegian General Dynamics F-16B Fighting Falcon during an exercise.

as a system of “moat and high wall” to deny penetration. States that possess such geography will naturally be more secure than those with long, porous and easily traversed borders, such as artificial lines drawn across plains. States that have vast expanses of land have greater room for strategic maneuver, such as relocating capitals when invaded. If the state is endowed with self-sustaining resources such as water, arable land, minerals and energy, it can afford to wait out a siege while on subsistence.

The human geography is another dimension to consider, in terms of the homogeneity or heterogeneity of its society. Homogeneity either in terms of ethnicity or ideology makes for a more united nation. If the population is nationalistic, popular resistance is viable as a form of warfare—this makes occupation a costly affair for any invader, especially if the invader is perceived as an “other.”

The regime of the state would feel secure if it has unassailable borders, and knows that it stands a greater chance of survival during an invasion because of its strategic depth and supportive population. A regime endowed with such features can afford to formulate a non-offensive strategy that seeks deterrence by denial, making invasion and occupation a very costly affair.

Switzerland, Norway and New Zealand are states that possess such qualities. Switzerland is a landlocked alpine state in central Europe. Norway is a maritime state located in the far north of Europe flanked by the North Atlantic Ocean to the west, the Skagerrak Straits in the south that is about 40 nautical miles wide at the narrowest point, and rugged mountains on the eastern flank. New Zealand is an archipelago located in the far south of the Pacific Ocean and is at least 850 nautical miles away from its nearest neighbor, Australia. These three states are

relatively isolated and have natural boundaries that are difficult to cross. All three states are vested with resources for autarkic survival. Although Norway, Switzerland and New Zealand are pluralistic societies, the people of all three states have a strong national identity.

STRATEGIC ENVIRONMENT

The strategic environment surrounding a state colors its sense of security. The geopolitics of the immediate region and beyond, in addition to international norms will influence how the state behaves. Again, “space” and “time” need to be considered in context of the strategic environment.

“Space,” in this context, determines the state’s proximity to hostile threats. Is the state

located within a stable benign neighborhood, or is it surrounded by hostile neighbors with whom relations are prone to crises? In the latter situation, a state may need a stronger and more robust defense strategy to respond to imminent or potential threats. In such circumstances, a state may be obliged to adopt a deterrence strategy that seeks punishment over denial. However, if the former is the case, an aggressive posture need not be adopted.

“Time,” denotes the historical experience of the state over different eras shaping its threat perception and approach to conflict resolution. It also includes the era in which the policy makers are situated. In Europe, years of destructive armed conflict culminated in the formation of the European Union. Violence between members is considered unpalatable and even taboo.



Royal New Zealand Navy Fleet Concentration in the Cook Strait

Cooperative mechanisms have permitted the reduction of risks associated with security dilemma between member states.

At the grand strategy level, the *zeitgeist* determines how a state is likely to behave. In earlier epochs, it was permissible for great powers to resolve conflict by force—including territorial expansionism. In the post-Cold War era, inter-state warfare is rare because the international order provides many mechanisms to de-escalate tensions—with international organizations such as the United Nations (UN), and the pre-eminence of the United States upholding hegemonic stability.

A Western European state in previous eras had to arm itself to the teeth to project a strong deterrent message. However, in the contemporary era, member states of the European Union can afford to scale down and calibrate their defense strategies to be purely defensive, assuming the absence of hegemonic ambitions. After the Treaty of Westphalia, Switzerland was occupied by the French during the Napoleonic era. Since then, the Swiss have kept invaders out of their borders with a strategic policy of neutrality and a credible defense force. Norway likewise experienced conflict with its neighbors in the Great Northern War when it was part of the Denmark-Norway personal union in the 1700s. An independent state since 1905, it was previously occupied by Germany during the Second World War (WWII) in spite of its neutrality. After WWII, Norway joined the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) and has not been invaded since. As for New Zealand, it has never been threatened since its inception as a British colony and “dominion.”

INTEREST OF GREAT POWERS

Geography is of strategic significance to great powers if a piece of land contains vital and rare resources such as energy, or if it controls a critical line of communication. If the geography

of a state is of no interest to a power, it is likely to feel less threatened by external aggression.⁷

Chokepoint control is essential to any power—whether continental or maritime, so long as the power relies on land or sea routes to maintain their pre-eminence. In the contemporary world order, a state that intends to be a superpower needs to be a maritime power. The control of waterways along narrow straits and littoral waters is fundamental to a superpower’s interest.⁸

Although Norway, Switzerland and New Zealand are pluralistic societies, the people of all three states have a strong national identity.

Turkey (Bosphorus Straits), Egypt (Suez Canal), Panama (Panama Canal), Singapore (narrowest limits of Strait of Malacca), Djibouti (Gulf of Aden), the United Arab Emirates and Iran (Straits of Hormuz) are important states because they control maritime chokepoints. States that possess a piece of terrain that is of importance to great powers may find itself in a vulnerable position, even if it faces no threats from immediate neighbors. Switzerland, Norway and New Zealand are not in such a position and should not be threatened, because they are not within the axes of advance of any powers. These states also do not harbor any energy resources or rare minerals essential for industrial production.

STATES PRACTICING Viable NON-OFFENSIVE DEFENSE STRATEGY

An Examination of Switzerland, Norway and New Zealand’s defense policies and military order of battle (ORBAT) shows that these states practice non-offensive defense and that it was viable in serving the security interests of the state. These states are not directly threatened by

any other state, have small militaries and limited force projection capabilities.

SWITZERLAND

Switzerland practices non-offensive defense, as explicitly stated in their defense white papers. The Swiss defense strategy is predicated on “dissuasion”—which is also termed “inoffensive deterrence.”⁹ Switzerland’s key national interests are maintaining its self-determination or “Preservation of Peace in Independence,” and to protecting its position of neutrality. It has no hegemonic intentions. Switzerland does not feel threatened by conventional wars as invasion was third on its list of security concerns in 1976 (the priority being economic and political subversion),¹⁰ and even lower by 1999.¹¹ While the country recognized that it may not be the sole object of an aggressor, Switzerland’s strategic significance to potential invaders had diminished.¹²

Switzerland renounced the use of force to back its demands *vis-à-vis* other states and reserved it only to defend its independence.¹³ It declared its strategy as defensive, and the doctrine of dissuasion was to keep the “price of entry” as high as possible—a doctrine of deterrence by denial. In the conduct of war, it recognized that it could not tackle threat at its source and could only fight within its own territory. Equipped with a small but credible armed force, Switzerland was willing to cede territory and mount popular resistance against the aggressor within its own borders.

In terms of ORBAT, Switzerland’s armed forces have an active strength of 4,100 (Army and Air Force) with 175,071 in reserve for a population of about 7.6 million people and a land mass of 41,277km² (with 1,852km border).¹⁴ It is good only for territorial defense and not for expeditionary purposes. The army has only four

infantry brigades, two armored brigades, and five artillery battalions with the biggest artillery piece being the 155mm self-propelled howitzer. For the Air Force, the main combat platforms are the F/A-18 Hornet, F-5E and F-5F Tiger II without air-to-air refueling capabilities. In terms of rapid deployment capability, Switzerland can only dispatch the 90-man Army Reconnaissance Detachment for contingencies such as disaster relief. In Switzerland’s Security Policy Report 2010, civil affairs support was made the central mission of the armed forces. Hence, Switzerland’s armed forces do not threaten others.

Switzerland’s strategic intent is defensive in nature, and its armed forces are configured only for local defense. Its non-offensive defense strategy has served her well and is viable because it is complemented by its political strategy of maintaining strategic neutrality.

NORWAY

Norway’s fundamental security policy objectives are worded such that it takes a more pro-active posture in preventing war and the emergence of threats. It seeks to secure Norwegian sovereignty, rights, interests (in the High North and Polar Circle) and ensures freedom of action alone or together with the Allies.¹⁵ Norway, unlike Switzerland, is part of NATO and has the obligation to defend its allies against aggression. However, it considers the use of force only as a last resort to be used in accordance with international law.

Norway recognized that following new geopolitical trends in the post-Cold War globalized world, inter-state warfare and *Realpolitik* have re-emerged as important factors in international politics. However, Norway has stated that it is not facing any imminent threat—although Russia is

its biggest neighbor.¹⁶ It did not mention Russia explicitly as a threat, but stated that it was in Norway's fundamental interest to contribute to Russia's peaceful relations with its neighbors and NATO by drawing it into a constructive cooperative framework.¹⁷ In terms of wording its strategic intent, Norway is deliberate in avoiding antagonistic relations with its powerful neighbor.

Norway is reconfiguring its armed forces to respond to the full spectrum of crises at home and abroad—including enforcing maritime claims in the North Sea and participating in peacekeeping missions. Yet it does not possess or seek any organic expeditionary capabilities. Norway's capabilities are good for territorial defense and enforcing maritime claims under the UN Convention on Law of the Sea (UNCLOS). It needs to depend on other NATO partners for force projection when participating in allied campaigns. Furthermore, Norway invokes NATO's Article V as its fundamental security guarantee, in addition to its faith in the European Security and Defense Policy (ESDP)¹⁸ and the Nordic defense cooperation structure.

Norway's armed forces have a total strength of about 17,000 personnel including conscripts. It has a tiny army—with only two active infantry battalions and an armored battalion, supported by only one artillery battalion (though equipped with ageing 227mm M270 multiple rocket launchers).¹⁹ The Norwegian air force is capable of defending its own airspace with F-16AM and F-16BM platforms.²⁰ Its naval capability is good for defending its littorals, with five frigates and six submarines, and for maintaining a presence in the High North. It lacks both air (only four C-130J) and naval lift capabilities (no landing platform docks).²¹ In sum, Norway is unable to project its power beyond its territory on its own and does not pose a threat to any of its neighbors.

While Norway does not explicitly state that it adopts a non-offensive defense strategy, the way it expresses its strategic intent and the substance of its armed forces can be deemed as non-offensive in nature. Norway's defense strategy is viable only because it is a member of a military alliance and depends on the alliance and security regimes to underwrite its security.

NEW ZEALAND

New Zealand will use military force in response to a direct threat to Australia or its own territories, as part of a collective action supporting members of the Pacific Islands Forum and as part of its contributions to the Five Power Defense Arrangements, or if requested by the UN. However, New Zealand recognizes that both it and its associated states are highly unlikely to face any direct military threats for the next 25 years.²² It does not feel threatened.

The key task of the New Zealand military is to respond to contingencies in the neighborhood, which are mostly humanitarian in nature, and to participate in UN-sanctioned peacekeeping missions. As it faces no threat, much of its force is geared towards overseas operations supporting peace.

The New Zealand Defense Force has a total of 9,836 regulars and is augmented by another 2,861 reserves. Its army is the largest among the three services, boasting two motorized infantry battalions and a medium armored reconnaissance squadron. It has one artillery regiment and its best equipment is the 105mm M101A Howitzer. It does not possess any combat air wing in its Air Force. The Navy has two landing craft, only because it is an archipelago. The New Zealand Defense Force is threat to no one.

New Zealand can afford a non-offensive defense strategy because it is not threatened by any other states, and depends on Australia to provide mutual support in times of crises.²³

VIABILITY OF A NON-OFFENSIVE DEFENSE STRATEGY

Non-offensive defense is clearly viable and has worked for Switzerland, Norway and New Zealand. Non-offensive defense is practical and practicable for states that possess defensible terrain, are situated within a benign strategic environment and not of interest to any great powers. There is no compulsion for any of these states to balance their power against others because they do not feel threatened. So far, they have not been invaded or threatened with force.

In the contemporary globalized world order, where there is a greater degree of cooperation between states and benign hegemony is the norm, there are sovereign states that have disbanded their military forces such as Costa Rica. Many South Pacific island and Caribbean states rely on the regional powers for protection. The states of Saint Lucia and Saint Vincent and the Grenadines rely on the Regional Security System for their defense.²⁴ These are examples of extreme non-offensive defense strategy in which the state does not keep standing armed forces and yet is still able to sustain its national existence.

Such defense strategies will remain relevant as long as the conditions hold. While geography is unlikely to change, the strategic environment is mutable and that may alter the significance of geography.²⁵ It is not implausible that the normative values of the world order will revert to predatory ones and *lebensraum* once again becomes a dominant idea—especially if water, arable land and other life sustaining resources become scarce as a result of environmental blight. In such case, it is not that non-offence defense is not viable but that the strategy has become irrelevant to the state. 

ENDNOTES

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