

# POLS 215: IR THEORY



# WHEN WE LAST MET...

- Key characteristic of the International State System:  
**ANARCHY**
- Problem: How can we understand how states act?
  - No well established expectations based on institutionalized roles and structures (e.g. R from red district in a red state)
  - Need to find a way to narrow expectations by analyzing actors' abilities and desires

# WHAT IS GAME THEORY?

**Game theory:** The scientific study of strategic interdependence

- Based on the concept of *rational choice*, which assumes that individuals weigh the costs and benefits and make choices to maximize their benefits
- Developed in the 1950s to study economic interactions (Coke vs. Pepsi) but applies just as well to state-level behavior (US vs. USSR)

# IR THEORY – REALISM

<b>Prisoner's Dilemma</b>		<b>Prisoner 1</b>	
		Cooperate ("Don't tell")	Defect ("Rat out")
<b>Prisoner 2</b>	Cooperate ("Don't tell")	P1 gets 1 month P2 gets 1 month	P1 gets NO TIME P2 gets 5 years
	Defect ("Rat out")	P1 gets 5 years P2 gets NO TIME	P1 gets 2 years P2 gets 2 years

		Player 1	
		Cooperate	Defect
Player 2	Cooperate	3 , 3	5 , 0
	Defect	0 , 5	1 , 1

# IR THEORY – REALISM

## Real world example: WWI

- Franz Ferdinand was assassinated by Serbian nationalists on June 28, 1914
- But why are states preemptively declaring war on each other?
- Military and political leaders at the time **believed** the offense had an enormous advantage
  - New military technology: machine guns, chemical gas, railroads

# IR THEORY – REALISM

## **Consider a world with two states...**

- Two strategies: preempt or defend
- Ranking the outcomes:
  1. I preempt, you defend (Surprise!)
  2. We both defend (Peace)
  3. We both preempt (War)
  4. I defend, you preempt (I'm a sucker...)

The Cult of  
the Offensive

# Germany

Defend

Preempt

# France

Defend

2, 2

0, 3

Preempt

3, 0

1, 1

	Defend	Preempt
Defend	2, 2	0, 3
Preempt	3, 0	1, 1



# IR THEORY – REALISM

## Why do states act the way they do?

- Primary objective is self-preservation
  - States act out of self-interests
  - Since they exist in an anarchic system, they can't trust others to be true to their word (there is nothing binding them), so they must rely on self-help (and assume others will do the same)
- What is the most important resource?
  - How is it measured?
  - Do you only care about *your* power?
  - Fundamental difference in how states act is their relative power
    - So you seek to maximize your power *relative* to everyone else's

# IR THEORY – REALISM

***The strong do what they can while the weak suffer what they must***

# IR THEORY – REALISM

***Do states want to go to war??***

# IR THEORY – REALISM

Circumstances that can lead to cooperation (or lack of conflict):

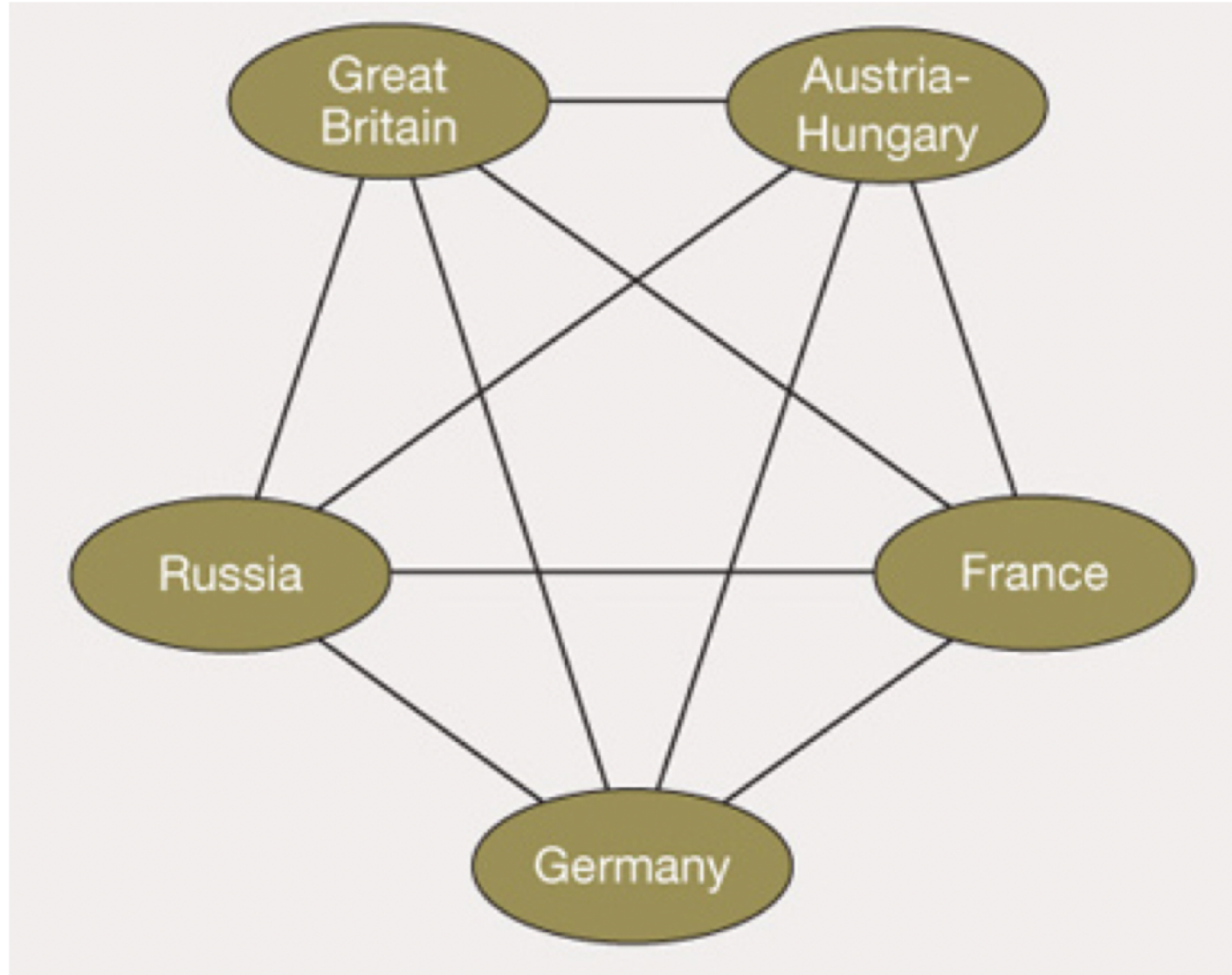
1) When it's better (i.e. in your interest) to defend than attack

- ***Balance of Power***

- States want to avoid a ***hegemon*** from rising up

- Could find (momentary) common cause to counterbalance the emergence of other great powers

## Balance of Power in 19<sup>th</sup> century Europe



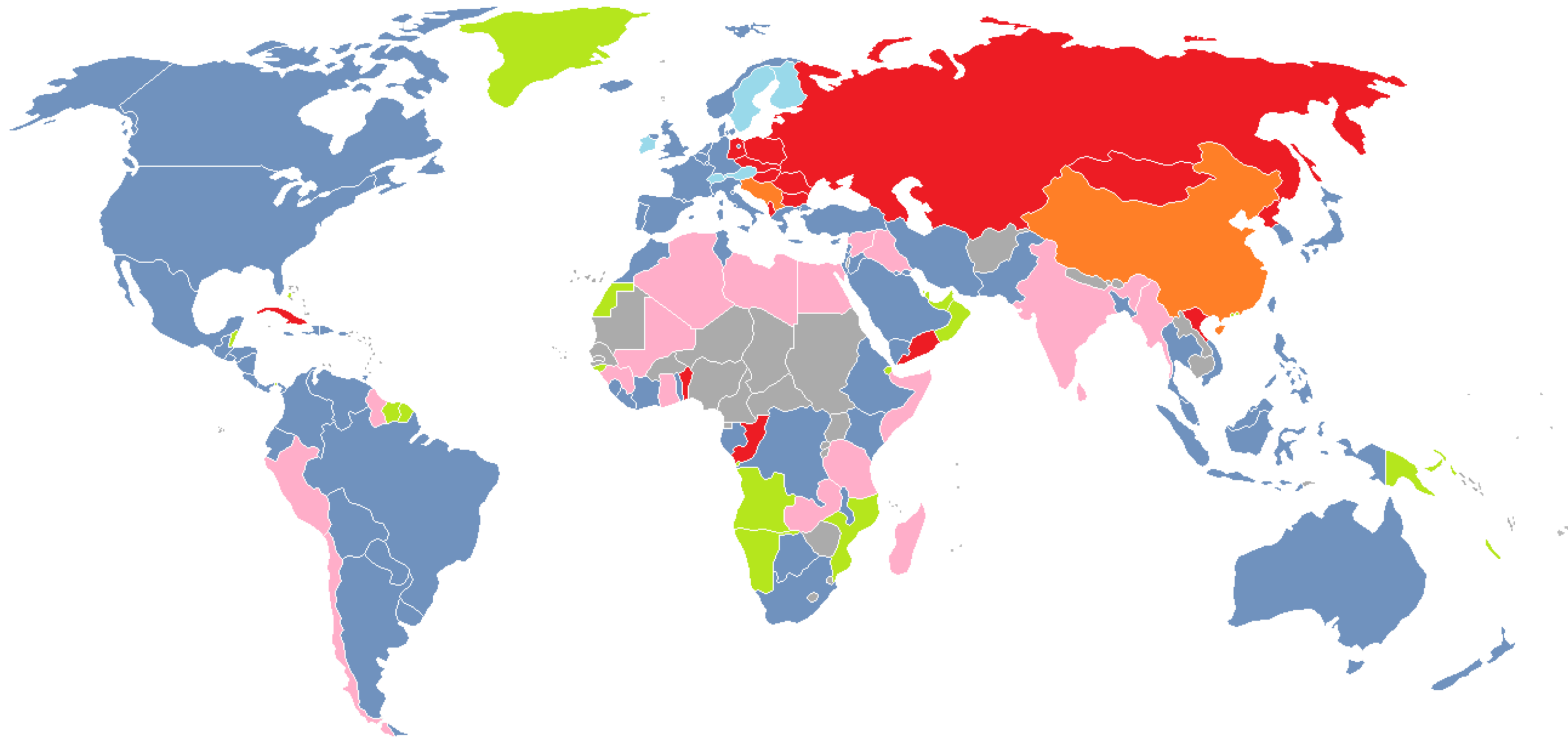


Truman-Stalin

*Bob Row '02*



*06/02*



# IR THEORY – REALISM

Circumstances that can lead to cooperation (or lack of conflict):

- 2) When states can clearly discern other states' intentions
  - BUT...this is really difficult – why?



# IR THEORY – REALISM

Circumstances that can lead to conflict:

## 1) Security Dilemma

- The actions one country takes ostensibly to bolster its defense are ***perceived*** by others as threatening causing a feedback loop of arms buildup that *may* eventually lead to war

# IR THEORY – REALISM

## Logic of a Security Dilemma:

- **State A** seeks to improve its security: it seeks power
- Once **State A** gains power, it inadvertently makes **State B** *insecure*
- **State B** then seeks more power, which it might not have otherwise done
- As **State B** gains power, **State A** again becomes insecure and seeks more power

**Results:** a vicious circle of power accumulation and a permanent condition of tension that \*could\* lead to war

**State of Anarchy**



**Uncertainty & Fear**



**Self-help through  
Power Accumulation**



**Security Dilemma  
(Spiral of Action/Reaction)**



**War or Threat of War**

**More Power, Less Security**

Arms Race		Player 1	
		Cooperate	Defect
Player 2	Cooperate	0 , 0	1 , -20
	Defect	-20 , 1	-1 , -1

# IR THEORY – REALISM

Circumstances that can lead to conflict:

## 2) Shift in *Balance of Power*

- When one state or coalition of states is much more powerful than its adversaries, war is relatively more likely
- Rise of Germany prior to WWI:
  - In 1870, the French and German populations and economies were of roughly similar size, and their economies were substantially smaller than Britain's
  - By 1900 Germany's population and economy were the largest in Europe, larger even than those of Britain (the continent's "balancer")
  - Germany noticed its might did not align with its influence and began taking a more aggressive posture in world politics

# IR THEORY – REALISM

## Takeaways:

- Gains are always relative (zero-sum)
- Not necessarily a state of constant war, but constant tension and distrust
  - States can never credibly commit to not stabbing you in the back
- Because you don't want your survival to be in someone else's hands, cooperation is *rare* and *narrowly* bounded

## WHEN NEXT WE MEET...

*Are there circumstances under which  
**cooperation** is the rational choice?*