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Research Note

DECLINING POWER AND THE PREVENTIVE MOTIVATION FOR WAR

By JACK S. LEVY*

The concept of “preventive war” is widely used in the theoretical and historical literature on international politics. It generally refers to a war fought now in order to avoid the risks of war under worsening circumstances later. To label a war as preventive is to provide a presumed explanation for its occurrence, but the explanatory power of the concept is diminished considerably by definitional ambiguities and by the failure to specify the antecedent conditions contributing to preventive war. In this study, I focus on the preventive motivation as a contributory cause of war. The concept of the preventive motivation for war is defined and differentiated from preemption and other sources of better-now-than-later logic, and the theoretical conditions affecting its strength are specified. These conceptual distinctions and theoretical propositions are illustrated with examples from a variety of historical cases, but I make no attempt to undertake a systematic empirical test of the propositions or an analysis of the historical frequency of preventive war.¹

The Literature on Preventive War

The theoretical significance of preventive war derives from the importance of the phenomenon of changing power differentials between states arising from uneven rates of growth—long a central theme in the “real-

* This research has been supported by the Stanford Center for International Security and Arms Control and by the Carnegie Corporation. The views expressed here do not necessarily represent those of the Center or the foundation. The author is grateful to the following individuals for their helpful comments on earlier versions of this study: Rick Collis, Kurt Gaubatz, Alexander George, Kimberly Marten, Cliff Morgan, James Morrow, Phil Rogers, Harrison Wagner, and Steve Weber.

¹ Until I complete my argument that it is more useful to focus on the preventive motivation as a contributory cause of war than on preventive war as a type of war, I will continue to refer to the concept of “preventive war” in my review of the literature.
ist” literature on international politics. The idea can be traced to Thucydides’ argument that “what made the Peloponnesian War inevitable was the growth of Athenian power and the fear which this caused in Sparta.” Similarly, Michael Howard maintains that the causes of most wars can be found in “perceptions by statesmen of the growth of hostile power and the fears for the restriction, if not the extinction, of their own.” Morgenthau refers to preventive war as a necessary means of maintaining equilibrium in the system. Gilpin concludes that, “according to realism, the fundamental cause of wars among states and changes in international systems is the uneven growth of power among states.”

Changes in relative power capabilities generated by differential rates of national growth have recently received even greater emphasis in Organski’s power transition theory, which suggests that war is most likely during the periods when the power capabilities of a rising and dissatisfied challenger begin to approach those of the leading state. This hypothesis has been incorporated into much of the recent literature on world systems dynamics and hegemonic transitions. In addition, many theorists have expressed great concern about the military as well as the economic stability of the contemporary era in the face of the decline of American power or “hegemony.”

There is some disagreement among theorists regarding the causal mechanism by which power transitions lead to war. One point that is central to Organski’s theory but less important in the other formulations concerns the identity of the aggressor or initiator of the war. Organski and Kugler argue that the weaker but rising challenger initiates the war against the dominant power. On theoretical grounds, however, there is no compelling reason to accept this hypothesis over the alternative prop-

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osition that the dominant power initiates preventive action to block the rising challenger while the latter is still too weak to mount a serious threat. Why should the challenger incur the risks of fighting while it is still inferior? Why doesn’t it wait until existing trends in economic and military power, which Organski and Kugler consider to be irreversible, catapult it into the stronger position? Organski concedes the plausibility of this alternative hypothesis, and mentions the possibility of “a preventive war launched by the dominant nation to destroy a competitor before it became strong enough to upset the existing international order.” He notes, however, that in recent history, it has been the challengers—Germany, Italy, and Japan—who “attacked the dominant nation and its allies long before they equaled them in power,” and generalizes that initiation by the challenger is the standard pattern.5

The idea of a preventive war by the dominant power to weaken or destroy a rising challenger while that opportunity is still available is asserted by Gilpin to be the “most attractive response” open to a dominant power in decline, and its importance is widely recognized in the historical literature.6 Schroeder asserts that “preventive wars, even risky preventive wars, are not extreme anomalies in politics. . . . They are normal, even common, tools of statecraft. . . .” A.J.P. Taylor argues:

The war of 1866, like the war of 1859 before it and the wars of 1870 and 1914 after it, was launched by the conservative Power, the Power standing on the defensive, which, baited beyond endurance, broke out on its tormentors. Every war between Great Powers [in the 1848-1918 period] started as a preventive war, not a war of conquest.

Anderson refers to Prussia’s attack against Austria in 1756 as “the most famous preventive war in history.” Numerous other cases have been described as preventive wars.7

The role of the preventive motivation in the 1914 case in particular has attracted a great deal of attention from historians;8 some recent work by political scientists on World War I has also focused on this variable. The


6 Gilpin (fn. 2), 191, 201.


8 Fritz Fischer, *Germany’s Aims in the First World War* (New York: Norton, 1961), and
theoretical and historical work of Lebow, Van Evera, and Snyder, which considers both preventive war and a preemptive strike as falling within the larger category of windows of vulnerability and opportunity, has been particularly influential. Van Evera, Snyder, and others argue that World War I can be interpreted as a preventive war. Lebow is more skeptical, though he supported that position in his earlier book. He argues that strategic considerations were more favorable for Germany in 1905, 1909, and 1912 than they were in 1914, and suggests that cognitive and domestic political variables are needed to explain why military pressures for preventive war were rejected in the first three cases, but not in 1914. He also points out that the rising power of the Soviet Union did not lead to preventive action by the United States after World War II, and that the Soviet Union did not move against China in the 1960s. Similarly, the decline of Britain's world position did not lead to a preventive war against the rising United States in the late nineteenth century. In other words, sometimes impending declines in relative power lead to preventive military action and sometimes they don't—a generalization that draws additional support from the mixed findings of some recent quantitative work. The important theoretical question concerns the conditions under which each outcome is most likely to occur.9

Organski attempts to answer this question by asserting (without discussion) that

war is most apt to occur: if the challenger is of such a size that at its peak it will roughly equal the dominant nation in power; if the rise of the challenger is rapid; if the dominant nation is inflexible in its policies; if there is no tradition of friendship between the dominant nation and the challenger;

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and if the challenger sets out to replace the existing international order with a competitive order of its own.

Van Evera and Snyder suggest that the likelihood of a preventive war or a preemptive strike depends on the magnitude of the power shift, the offensive/defensive balance, and the probability that the adversary will initiate a war during the period of vulnerability. These are useful beginnings, but there are additional variables that affect the likelihood that a state’s decline in relative power will lead to preventive military action, and these complex processes need to be explored in further detail. A major purpose of this study is to propose a more comprehensive explanatory framework for the analysis of power shifts, the preventive motivation, and war. Before this can be done, however, it is necessary to refine the concept of preventive war, for its explanatory power is limited by some serious analytical problems.  

**Definition of the Preventive Motivation**

As Van Evera notes, the concept of preventive war is generally used in the literature to refer to a *type* of war, which is defined by a particular cause—the incentive or motivation for preventive action. This might be useful if we wanted to restrict our attention to this one causal sequence and ignore other causes, for then the linkage between shifting power differentials, the preventive motivation, and the outbreak of war would be neatly summarized by the concept of preventive war. A problem arises, however, if our aim is a more general theoretical and empirical analysis of the causes of war. What we are ultimately trying to explain is the outbreak of *war*, not merely preventive war. Power shifts are neither a necessary nor a sufficient condition for war, but one cause among many, the relative importance of which we want to analyze. The confounding of cause and effect in the single concept of preventive war makes it very difficult to analyze cases in which power shifts are not followed by war, in which wars occur in the absence of power shifts, or in which power shifts interact with other variables in complex ways. Each of these is necessary for a controlled analysis of the causes of war. It is precisely because there is no perfect correlation between power shifts and war that it is useful to conceptualize the preventive motivation as an intervening variable between power shifts and the outbreak of war. In addition, power shifts may lead to war through other mechanisms besides the preventive moti-

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10 Organski (fn. 3), 376; Stephen Van Evera, "The Causes of War," Ph.D. diss. (University of California, Berkeley, 1984), 72-76; Snyder (fn. 9), 160-61.

11 Van Evera (fn. 10), 71.
viation (for example, war may be initiated by the rising challenger rather than the declining leader), and the intensity of the preventive motivation may be affected not only by the nature of the power shift but also by other variables, such as historical antagonisms. An analysis of the effects of power shifts and other variables on the intensity of the preventive motivation (which is a continuous, not dichotomous, variable), and of the conditions under which the preventive motivation leads to war, requires that the antecedent, intervening, and dependent variables be defined and operationalized independently of each other.

Thus, the notion of a preventive war is not very useful for a theoretical and empirical analysis of the causes of war. The key question is not whether a particular war is preventive; instead, it concerns the relative importance of the preventive motivation with respect to other variables in the processes leading to war and the conditions affecting its intensity. After defining the concept of the preventive motivation and distinguishing it from other concepts with which it is often confused, this analysis will examine the conditions affecting the strength of the preventive motivation.

The preventive motivation for war arises from the perception that one's military power and potential are declining relative to that of a rising adversary, and from the fear of the consequences of that decline. There is an apprehension that this decline will be accompanied by a weakening of one's bargaining position and a corresponding decline in the political, economic, cultural, and other benefits that one receives from the status quo; and further, that one might be faced with a future choice between a dangerous war and the sacrifice of vital national interests. The temptation is to fight a war under relatively favorable circumstances now in order to block or retard the further rise of an adversary and to avoid both the worsening of the status quo over time and the risk of war under less favorable circumstances later. The situation is particularly serious because

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12 Note that the emphasis is on the decline in relative strength, consistent with the conception of power in relational and zero-sum terms. See Robert Gilpin, *U.S. Power and the Multinational Corporation* (New York: Basic Books, 1975), chap. 1. A state whose capabilities are increasing in absolute terms may have an incentive for preventive action if its adversary is growing even faster. Note also that the emphasis is on the perception of changing power differentials by state decision makers.

13 Preventive military action is not, of course, the only possible "solution" to the problem of an impending decline in relative military potential. Future security might also be provided by alliances. Although the conditions under which states resort to alliances rather than to preventive military action is an important research question, my working hypothesis is that great powers are hesitant to rely on others to satisfy their long-term security needs. Alliances tend to be transient in nature and excessively affected by domestic politics and personalities; consequently, they are unreliable over the long haul. Moreover, alliances deal with the symptoms rather than with the causes of a future threat, whereas preventive military action sometimes
of the tendency for states to give greater weight to losses than to gains. They are more likely to fight to maintain an existing status quo than to change the status quo in their favor. Preventive war is more concerned with minimizing one's losses from future decline than with maximizing one's gains by fighting now.\textsuperscript{44}

This definition of the preventive motivation is broader than most that are suggested in the literature. In addition to the perception of a decline in relative power capabilities, one or more of the following assumptions are usually included: the preventer's perception of the inevitability, or at least high probability, of a future war; his expectation of being surpassed in power capabilities by the rising adversary; the preventer's initiation of the war; and his military superiority. Although it is common to define prevention to include the preventer's perception of the high probability of a future war, that is neither necessary nor desirable. Statesmen act on the basis of expected utility rather than probability alone. If they fear what their rising adversary \textit{might} do once he gains superiority, and if they believe that this is their "last chance" to avoid a situation in which the adversary has the potential to do substantial harm, a war launched for these reasons should be considered preventive. The perception of a high probability of war may make a preventive action more likely, but that is a hypothesis to be tested rather than a definitional requirement for the preventive motivation. Similar reasoning leads to a rejection of the definitional requirement that the preventer perceive that he will soon be overtaken by the adversary. The same motivation for prevention would apply, though perhaps with less force, if the declining state expected only

\footnotesize{provides the hope of dealing more directly with the source of the threat (though the true sources are often economic).

Another alternative to preventive military action, for certain states under certain conditions, would be an attempt to reverse one's decline through internal means, such as a policy of industrial revitalization. Although such efforts are more viable over the long term than the short term, this may be the preferred alternative if the immediate military threat is not too great. At this stage, the preventive motivation for war can best be analyzed by isolating it from alternative policy instruments, but ultimately the role of alliances and of internal change will have to be included in an integrated model. (The possible importance of industrial revitalization has been emphasized to me by David Lake.)}

\footnotesize{My assertion that states tend to give greater weight to losses than to gains is consistent with recent findings from experimental psychology. If \( A \) is preferred to \( B \), an individual at \( A \) would be willing to pay more to avoid dropping to \( B \) than the same individual at \( B \) would be willing to pay to move up to \( A \). See Daniel Kahneman and Amos Tversky, "Prospect Theory: An Analysis of Decision Under Risk," \textit{Econometrica} 47 (March 1979): 263-91; Kahneeman and Tversky, "Choices, Values, and Frames," \textit{American Psychologist} 39 (April 1984), 341-50; Jack L. Knetsch and John A. Sinden, "Willingness to Pay and Compensation Demanded: Experimental Evidence of an Unexpected Disparity in Measures of Value," \textit{Quarterly Journal of Economics} 99 (August 1984), 507-21. This phenomenon is related to the concept of framing and to risk orientation, which are discussed later. See fn. 45.}
to be weakened rather than actually surpassed in strength. Victory might still be expected later, but with less certainty and at higher costs.\textsuperscript{15}

It is generally assumed that the preventer initiates the war, but this may not be true if the initiator is defined as the actor who strikes first. Even if the preventer wants a war, he may have diplomatic or domestic political incentives for provoking his adversary into striking first. An attack by the adversary would contribute to his diplomatic isolation and to the mobilization of one's own population behind the war effort (or at least minimize any domestic political costs of the war).\textsuperscript{16} It is also generally assumed that the preventer must be the stronger actor, or at least perceive himself as the stronger actor. Yet the logic of prevention would also apply to a weaker state which perceives that its inferiority will increase in the future and that the status quo will deteriorate even further. Though such a state would be likely to lose a preventive war, the probability and costs of defeat in a later war would presumably be even greater, so that the expected utility of fighting now would exceed the expected utility of delay. Moreover, most of the hypotheses generated later in this study to specify the conditions under which a stronger state in decline is most likely to act preventively are equally applicable to a weaker state in decline; they actually explain why preventive action by a weaker state is so rare historically. My definition of the preventive motivation is thus not formally restricted to the stronger actor, though there are few historical cases in which the preventive motivation was an important factor in a war initiated or provoked by a weaker state in decline.\textsuperscript{17}

\textsuperscript{15} For other definitions of "preventive war," see Alfred Vagts, \textit{Defense and Diplomacy} (New York: King's Crown, 1956), 263; Julian Linder, \textit{On the Nature of War} (Farnborough, England: Saxon House, 1977), 63; Lebow (fn. 9, 1984), 154; Van Evera (fn. 11), 60-61; Organski (fn. 3), 371; Bernard Brodie, \textit{War and Politics} (New York: Macmillan, 1973), 25; Gilpin (fn. 2), 191; Fischer (fn. 8, 1975), 468. Fischer's definition, which requires not just the perception of inevitability but also the actual intention by the target state to launch a war against the preventer within a few years, is very restrictive. It is also self-serving, for it facilitates his thesis of German war guilt and the argument that the German decision for war was not a preventive action deriving from perceived military necessity, but instead an unprovoked war of aggression. Because the concept of the preventive motivation refers to the motivation of the preventer, it is proper to focus on his perceptions alone, without including the intentions of the target.

\textsuperscript{16} For example, German Chancellor Bethmann-Hollweg insisted to the military that they must allow Russia to mobilize first. He was concerned about the reaction not only of England, but also of the Social Democrats in Germany who, he believed, would approve war credits only for a defensive war against Russia. Similarly, German Admiral von Müller argued that Germany should "present Russia or France or both with an ultimatum which would unleash the war with right on our side." Moltke later agreed that "the attack must come from the Slavs." See Fischer (fn. 8, 1975), 162; (fn. 8, 1961), 33; Fischer, \textit{World Power or Decline?} (New York: Norton, 1974), 36. See also Vagts (fn. 15), 290-91.

\textsuperscript{17} The Japanese attack on Pearl Harbor may be one example. It should be emphasized that preventive military action can be taken by any state in decline relative to a particular adver-
This analysis has been based on the implicit assumption that the perceived threat derives from a continuing long-term secular decline in a state’s relative military power and potential—presumably the result of a comparative decline in economic efficiency and rate of growth. The preventive motivation may also arise in a situation in which the decline in relative power is expected to be more transient in nature, spanning years rather than generations. Such a power shift may result from a military reorganization, an arms build-up, the procurement of armaments from abroad, an advance in military technology, or the formation of a hostile military coalition. Each of these generates intermediate-term changes in relative power and temporary windows of vulnerability. Although the latter may be less serious than a long-term decline (in that states can resort to short-term expedients such as alliances or conciliation to provide for their immediate security), they may also have the opposite effect: preventive military action may be more effective in averting a short-term cyclical downswing than a long-term secular decline. In fact, temporary windows of vulnerability have been the primary source of the preventive motivation in several historical cases, including the Seven Years’ War (Frederick’s fear that a hostile military coalition would form within a year) and World War I (Germany’s fear of Russia’s increased strength by 1917 after the latter’s military reorganization and the upgrading of her railroad system).

Analytical Distinctions

The preventive motivation for war is often confused with other sources of better-now-than-later logic, particularly the preemptive motivation. Whereas prevention involves fighting a winnable war now in order to avoid the risk of war later under less favorable circumstances, preemption involves the initiation of military action because it is perceived that an adversary’s attack is imminent and that there are advantages in striking first, or at least in preventing the adversary from doing so. The two differ along several separate dimensions.18

One is simply the time that elapses until the actual threat of war m-

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18 This discussion builds on some earlier distinctions made by Van Evera (fn. 9), 64n; (fn. 11), chaps. 1-2. See also Snyder (fn. 9), 160; Robert E. Harkavy, “Preemption and Two-Front Conventional Warfare” (Jerusalem Papers on Peace Problems, No. 23, Hebrew University, 1977), 6-7. Note that the distinction between prevention and preemption applies across the entire continuum of military action, from the surgical use of force to all-out war. The Israeli attack on the Iraqi nuclear reactor in 1982 was preventive, whereas the Israeli attack against Egyptian airfields in 1967 was preemptive.
terializes. A preemptive strike is undertaken in response to the threat of an attack that is perceived to be imminent, whereas preventive action is a response to a threat that will generally take several years to develop. Preemption is a tactical response to an immediate threat, whereas prevention is a more strategic response to a long-term threat. The source of the threat also differs. A preemptive attack is designed to forestall the mobilization and deployment of the adversary’s existing military forces, whereas prevention aims to forestall the creation of new military assets. Thus, the consequences of the failure to act are different for the preventer and the preemptor. The preemptor perceives (by definition) that the near-certain consequence of his failure to attack is an attack by the adversary. He knows that he will probably have no opportunity to reverse his decision, no opportunity to monitor the adversary’s behavior and respond appropriately. For the preventor, the consequence of non-action is not an imminent attack by the adversary; instead, it is the gradual deterioration of his own relative military power and the risk of a more costly war from a position of inferiority. He still may have time to attempt to reverse his decline in relative power capabilities through internal economic, political, or military changes; to secure allies; to attempt to mend relations with the threatening adversary; to adjust to the changing distribution of power; to wait and see if the anticipated threat actually materializes; or to fight a preventive (or preemptive) war later if conditions warrant it.  

Thus, the incentives to strike first are different for the preemptor and the preventer. The preemptor, by definition, has an incentive to strike first, which may be intensified by a military technology favoring the offense or by the existence of military doctrines emphasizing the offensive. The preventor does not necessarily have an incentive to strike first. It may be desirable for diplomatic and domestic political reasons to induce an adversary to strike first; and it may also be feasible because of the margin of safety provided by the preventer’s own military superiority (assuming he is stronger). Note that the incentive to preempt does not require that the adversary have an objective incentive to strike first. All that is necessary is

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19 The less time for these corrective measures, the more similar the situation is to preemption and the greater the incentive for military action. The preemptive motivation is generally stronger than the preventive one; the presence of both motivations is particularly destabilizing.

20 Van Evera (fn. 9), 63-65.

21 In a crisis in which both states consider preemption, the stronger state may have an incentive to allow the adversary to strike first, as illustrated by Israel in 1973. The weaker state rarely has the luxury of waiting. For this reason, preemption is generally perceived as more legitimate for weaker states. This legitimacy reduces, to a certain extent, the potential diplo-
that the preemperor perceive that his failure to initiate will result in an adversary attack, or at least that the probability of such an attack in conjunction with its expected costs require preemptive action. These differences in incentives for the preventer and the preemperor are related to differences in their military strength. Whereas a preventer is usually the militarily stronger state, a preemperor may be either the weaker or the stronger; for reasons discussed above, he is usually the weaker.

Because the concepts of preventive and preemptive motivations can be distinguished along a number of dimensions, a theory of preemption cannot be used to explain preventive action. A separate analysis of the conditions determining the strength of the preventive motivation is necessary.

It is conceivable, of course, that a state may find itself in both a preemptive and a preventive situation: it may perceive that its failure to attack may result not only in the gradual decline in its relative military power but also in an imminent attack by the adversary; that may have been the situation perceived by Germany in late July 1914. In this case, the preference for war and the incentive to strike first are particularly strong. It is also possible for war to be simultaneously preventive for one state and preemptive for its adversary: B’s recognition that A is preparing for preventive action may lead B to preempt, which may play exactly into A’s

matic and domestic political costs of preemption, and thus makes such preemption more likely.

22 Van Evera (fn. 9, p. 64) and Snyder (fn. 9, p. 160 n.) argue that preemption involves the simultaneous incentive by both parties to strike first, whereas with prevention, the incentive is one-way. My analysis suggests that they are wrong on both counts.

23 There are some secondary differences between prevention and preemption. Whereas the preventer basically “wants war” in the sense that it would demand enormous concessions by the adversary and make few (if any) of its own in order to avoid war, that is not necessarily true for the preemperor, who may prefer to avoid war but feel compelled by circumstances to preempt. Finally, even when prevention involves (as it usually does) the perception of a high probability of a future war, the preemperor perceives the probability of an immediate war to be even greater.

24 “Windows” generated by the anticipated formation of a hostile military coalition present some analytical problems, for they blur the distinction between preemption and prevention. The greater the certainty that such a coalition will form—and particularly if it has already formed—the greater the expected likelihood that war will follow, and consequently the greater the incentive to strike first. The situation then begins to resemble preemption more than prevention, and our hypotheses on the preventive motivation are less likely to be valid. An example of the preemption of a hostile coalition before it is formed is Frederick the Great’s action initiating the Seven Years’ War (see fn. 37); an example of the preemption of a coalition after it has formed is France’s initiation of the Revolutionary Wars. Betts’s argument that throughout most of the nuclear age the likelihood of preventive war has been “close to zero” while the likelihood of preemption has been considerably higher, is, if correct, but one example of the utility of this distinction. See Richard K. Betts, “Surprise Attack and Preemption,” in Graham T. Allison, Albert Carnesale, and Joseph S. Nye, Jr., eds., Hawks, Doves, and Owls (New York: Norton, 1985), 54-79.
hands. In another variation, both sides may anticipate their own decline and thus both have an incentive for prevention.

Preventive-strike logic should also be differentiated from other sources of better-now-than-later logic. One reason why a state may prefer war now to the costs and risks involved in delay has to do with credibility or reputation. Statesmen often believe that the failure to go to war when challenged, or at least to take firm action involving the risk of war, may lower their country's (or their own personal) reputation for resolve, and hence undermine deterrence and increase the danger of a future war by miscalculation. This incentive to take additional risks, and perhaps even precipitate a war to maintain credibility, may be particularly important for great powers in decline because their authority is most in doubt. Similarly, great powers may intervene in small wars in order to demonstrate resolve and to reinforce deterrence against their primary adversaries with regard to more vital interests. Statesmen's concerns for credibility are undeniably important in decisions for war, but they are analytically distinct from the logic of preventive action based primarily on declining capabilities. Statesmen may also decide to fight a small war now in order to resolve certain disputes before they become more serious, and in this way minimize the risk of having to fight a larger war later. This differs from

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25 This situation raises a difficult methodological problem. If $B$ preempts, how do we determine whether this is exclusively a preemptive action by $B$ or whether it also involves the preventive motivation by $A$? These situations cannot be distinguished on behavioral grounds alone, for observed state behavior may be identical in the two situations. It is therefore necessary to examine the actual motivations of $A$'s decision makers in order to determine if they wanted a war to block the rise of $B$, yet preferred that $B$ initiate the war. This problem is complicated by the possibility that a state may launch a purely aggressive war for nonpre- ventive reasons but, for diplomatic and internal political purposes, will try to justify it as preventive action that is necessary in the face of a rapidly rising adversary and the inevitability of a future war.

26 Mutual preventive motivations could occur because of a faulty assessment, by at least one state, of existing military capabilities and their trends in the near future. One example might be the Franco-Prussian War, with France fearing a rising Prussia and Prussia being concerned about the impact of French army reforms. Another might be the Russo-Japanese War, where the rising Japanese may have feared the completion of the Russian railroad in Manchuria. See Michael Howard, *The Franco-Prussian War* (London: Methuen, 1981), 54; William L. Langer, "The Origin of the Russo-Japanese War," in Langer, *Explorations in Crises* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1969), 37, 40. Mutual preventive motivations could also occur if two states evaluate military power from two different analytical frameworks. A global power may perceive the erosion of its global dominance by a rising regional power; the latter may simultaneously perceive the erosion of its regional dominance by an expanding global power. For example, the attack on Pearl Harbor may have been in part a preventive action by the Japanese to consolidate their regional superiority before the opportunity vanished; at the same time, the United States may have undertaken strong coercive measures in part to prevent the erosion of its global power position by an expansionist Japan.

the preventive motivation in that it does not necessarily involve the perception of a decline in relative power capabilities. These latter situations also differ from preventive logic because the consequences of delay include not only the future capabilities and intentions of a particular adversary, but also the future behavior of third states.

This is an important point. The preventive motivation, as defined here and in nearly all of the literature, involves action against a particular adversary now rather than running the risk of a more costly war against that same adversary later. It is an intervening variable in a causal chain leading from changing power differentials to the outbreak of war, and describes national-level behavior motivated by a concern for a dyadic power relationship. It is subsumed under, but not equivalent to, the more general concern that the failure to act may leave one worse off. The latter concern would apply to any actor in any situation, but such a broadening of the concept of prevention would severely restrict its utility. Thus, a statement to the effect that “all wars are basically preventive” may be true in one sense, but it is not very useful.

Statesmen may also have domestic political reasons for believing that it is preferable to fight a war now rather than later. Under certain conditions, policy makers may believe that a successful war would increase or at least maintain their domestic political support. Such a war might satisfy specific interest-group pressures, exploit more generalized jingoistic sentiment, or distract the public’s attention from internal social or economic problems through the creation of an external scapegoat. These causes of war may be important under certain conditions, but they should not be confused with preventive logic. The scapegoat motive and the preventive motive are analytically distinct, though both of them may operate in a particular case and reinforce each other.28

Perhaps the most obvious reason why statesmen may prefer war now rather than later is that they perceive vital national interests to be directly

28 In fact, we might expect to find the preventive and scapegoat motivations to occur together frequently, for they may be the product of the same underlying processes. Economic decline often generates social problems and political insecurity for the elite at the same time it undercuts the military power and potential of the state. It is often argued, for example, that German and Austro-Hungarian leaders were driven to war in 1914 by the combined fear of the decline of German military power abroad and the rise of social democracy and disorder at home. V. R. Berghahn concludes that the ruling elites in Germany “were increasingly haunted by the nightmare of impending internal chaos and external defeat so that an offensive war appeared to be the only way out of the general deadlock.” Berghahn, Germany and the Approach of War in 1914 (New York: St. Martin’s, 1973), 213. See also Fischer (fn. 8, 1975), 398; Ritter (fn. 8), 227-39. For more general analyses of the use of force externally for internal political purposes, see Arno J. Mayer, “Internal Causes and Purposes of War in Europe, 1870-1956: A Research Assignment,” Journal of Modern History 41 (September 1969), 291-303; Jack S. Levy, “Domestic Politics and War,” Journal of Interdisciplinary History 18 (Spring 1988).
and immediately threatened. If the adversary cannot be persuaded to remove the threat, war may be perceived as the only viable means of preserving those interests. This would clearly not be a case of preventive motivation, for which immediate interests are secondary. The more important the immediate threat to well-defined national interests, the less the relative importance of the preventive motivation. The "ideal type" case of preventive action is one in which there is no immediate conflict of strategic or economic interests, only the recognition of the state's deteriorating power position and the fear of potentially fatal consequences should an adversary resort to war once he has achieved a position of superiority. Recognizing that the preventive motivation may be more important than the tangible interests immediately at stake, Michael Howard argues that

in 1914 many of the German people, and in 1939 nearly all of the British, felt justified in going to war, not over any specific issue that could have been settled by negotiation, but to maintain their power; and to do so while it was still possible, before they found themselves so isolated, so impotent, that they had no power left to maintain and had to accept a subordinate position within an international system dominated by their adversaries.

This theme is implicit in much of the balance-of-power literature. Morgenthau, for example, argues that, whatever the ultimate aims of states, their immediate objective is to maintain their power and prestige. Preventive war is one response to the expectation of decline in relative power and the fear of its consequences. Let us now consider the conditions contributing to the motivation for preventive military action.

The Strength of the Preventive Motivation: Some Hypotheses

A first approximation of the strength of the preventive motivation for war can be determined by a rational cost-benefit framework based on expected-utility calculations, comparing the advantages and disadvantages of war now with those of delay. It will then be necessary to modify this framework by including misperceptions and domestic and bureaucratic politics in the analysis. Before we begin, however, it would be useful to

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10. Recall that the preventive motivation is only one of several possible responses to declining military power and potential. A complete analysis would have to evaluate the relative costs and benefits of alternative policy options, particularly alliances. See fn. 13; also, Benjamin A.
consider an important objection to the basic expected-utility framework guiding this analysis. One might argue that the costs and benefits of the rising state should also be included, and that the problem be conceived as one of bargaining. There is some level of concessions that the challenger would prefer to grant rather than to fight, particularly since he can always hope to regain those concessions later when he is stronger. Similarly, there is some level of concessions that the declining state would prefer to accept from the challenger rather than to initiate a war. If the challenger’s offer exceeded the declining state’s demands, war would not occur. Moreover, if both states agreed on the likely outcome of the war, they would be better off accepting that outcome without incurring the actual costs of war.

My argument, however, is that this problem is not best conceived as one of bargaining. The issue is not a conflict of concrete interests in which each party can easily calculate its gains and losses from different levels of concessions and negotiate accordingly, but a question of future influence over a range of diverse and partly unpredictable issues that cannot be calculated with any degree of precision and that are not easily amenable to negotiation. Moreover, the very intensity of the conflict tends to generate different perceptions by the adversaries of the stakes, threats, legitimate aims, and acceptable alternatives to war. It is extremely unlikely that any level of concessions exists that would be both sufficient for the preventer and reasonable for the challenger. The very fact that the declining state knows that the rising adversary will probably be able to regain any concession later makes the former less likely to accept those concessions. The kind of concessions most acceptable to the declining state would be those that impeded the further increase in the military power of the rising adversary. But the source of the challenger’s increasing military potential is often the fundamental restructuring of his internal economic system in response to changes in technology and other factors of production, which cannot easily be bartered away. Moreover, it is unlikely that the political leaders of a rising state would accept an agreement that would condemn them to a permanent position of inferiority, involve substantial reputational costs, and generate enormous domestic political opposition. Such concessions can perhaps be successfully demanded from a thoroughly defeated state, but not from one on the rise. If the preventer chooses to block his adversary’s further increases in strength rather than delay or accelerate his own armaments program, he generally finds that he has few op-

tions other than war. It would not be technically incorrect to introduce the defender's calculations into the model, but this would probably add far more complexity than explanatory power, and enormously complicate any empirical analysis.31

THE COSTS AND BENEFITS OF DELAY

The most important factor affecting the strength of the preventive motivation is the preventer's perception of the extent to which military power and potential are shifting in favor of a particular adversary. This decline will have a direct impact on his future bargaining power and the distribution of benefits from the status quo, and an indirect impact on the probability of a future war. The greater the expected advantage of the adversary, the greater his relative bargaining position, the extent of the preventer's likely concessions, and the likely costs of a future war; hence, the greater the incentive for preventive action now in an attempt to impede the rise of the adversary. If the challenger's potential for growth is limited, and particularly if the challenger is unlikely to surpass the leading power, the preventive motivation is much weaker.32 The stronger power may still have an incentive to maintain its margin of superiority, but in the absence of a more serious future threat, the potential costs of war may be too high.

An alternative hypothesis is suggested by William R. Thompson. He argues that "the probability of conflict is also reduced if the challenger's potential for growth is so great that its eventual rise to dominance seems inevitable. Both the challenger and the dominant power are more likely to have time to adjust to the likelihood of transition." This assumes the expectation that war would have no effect on the evolution of relative power capabilities. Statesmen have often convinced themselves that war will reverse or retard the rising military power of the adversary, however, and history provides few examples of states' nonviolent acceptance of their national decline.33

The rate at which the power differential is closing may be even more important than its ultimate magnitude. Whereas the adversary's ultimate

31 For an argument reaching similar conclusions, see Bruce M. Russett, "Pearl Harbor: Deterrence Theory and Decision Theory," Journal of Peace Research 4 (1967), 89-105. Also see Betts (fn. 24), 62.
32 In cases where the preventer is not fearful of being overtaken in the near future, certain critical thresholds of adversary strength may still be important (for example, Israel's concern in 1982 about Iraq's acquisition of a nuclear capability).
power potential is distant in time and difficult to predict, his rate of
growth is readily observable and therefore more threatening. The faster
the relative rise of the challenger, the greater the incentive for prevention.
A rapid rise increases the expectation of the declining state that it will in
fact be overtaken and that it will be overtaken quickly, as well as the
tendency to exaggerate these trends. It also reduces the declining state’s
time to increase its own power, gain allies, seek an accommodation with
its rival, or otherwise adjust to the changing distribution of power.34

The strength of the preventive motivation is also an increasing func-
tion of the expected probability of a future war with an ever more pow-
erful adversary, which in turn is a function of numerous variables. The
greater the ultimate superiority of the rising challenger, the stronger his
future bargaining position and his disenchantment with the present sta-
tus quo, the greater his confidence in a military victory in the event of
war, the greater his demands for concessions, and consequently the
greater the likelihood of either unacceptable concessions or a future war.
Admittedly, a pure power model cannot fully account for a decision mak-
er’s expected probability of a future war with a particular adversary. Brit-
ain, for example, was surely more concerned about the rise of Germany
in the late 19th century than about the rise of the United States, and Ger-
many was more concerned about the rise of Russia than about that of the
United States. In addition to variables’ modifying strict power ratios,
such as geographical proximity and asymmetries in the elements of mil-
itary power, historical antagonisms and ideological conflicts must also be
considered. The importance of these should not be exaggerated, however,
particularly for the leading state in the system, and especially if it faces
one well-defined challenger in a bipolar situation. The threats perceived
by these states and their subsequent behavior are usually determined pri-
marily by their general interest in the configuration of power in the sys-
tem rather than by their particular interests (including specific historical,
economic, and ideological conflicts).35

A related factor that increases the historical importance of the prevent-
tive motivation is the tendency of decision makers, when faced with a
rapidly rising adversary, to speak of the “inevitability” of war. When de-

34 Organski (fn. 3) and Thompson (fn. 33) suggest that a rapid rise may increase the chal-
lenger’s incentives for war, but this is less significant than the effect of a narrowing power
differential on the stronger state.

35 On the importance of systemic interests for leading states, see Kenneth N. Waltz, Theory
of International Politics (Reading, MA: Addison-Wesley, 1979), chap. 8; Glenn H. Snyder and
Gilpin (fn. 2). The incentives for prevention by a leading or “hegemonic” state will be partic-
ularly great since it has a disproportionate influence on the distribution of benefits and influ-
ence in the system. See ibid.
decision makers perceive war to be "inevitable," they have fewer incentives to attempt to manage the crisis; instead, they concentrate their efforts on defensive preparations for war or on trying to ensure that it occurs at an opportune moment. As Bismarck remarked, "No government, if it regards war as inevitable even if it does not want it, would be so foolish as to leave to the enemy the choice of time and occasion and to wait for the moment which is most convenient for the enemy." Perceptions of inevitability are also important because of their impact on the political decision-making process: the internal opponents of war are deprived of their most compelling argument, for avoiding preventive action will not help to avoid war. Perceptions of the inevitability of war may themselves contribute to the outbreak of war by generating self-fulfilling prophecies.

The Costs and Benefits of War Now

The expected costs of delay can be a powerful motivation for prevention, but fighting a war now can also be costly. The critical variables here are the preventer's expected probability of victory and the associated risks of defeat, and the expected costs of each. The greater the probability of victory and the lower the expected costs of war, the stronger the preventive motivation. Although the degree of military superiority of the pre-

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36 Fischer (fn. 8 1975), 461. Though statesmen frequently use the term "inevitability," they presumably mean a very high probability of war. For one of the few discussions of this important variable, see Lebow (fn. 9, 1981), 254-63. Note that a limited preventive attack involves fewer risks and may be more common in the absence of such fatalism.

37 A major reason why the preventive motivation was important in the Seven Years' War in Europe was that the war was perceived as inevitable by Frederick. See Walter L. Dorn, *Competition for Empire, 1740-1763* (New York: Harper & Row, 1963), 312-14; Vagts (fn. 15), 277; R. B. Mowat, *A History of European Diplomacy, 1451-1789* (Hamden, CT: Archon, 1971), 244-46. The elder Moltke's belief in the inevitability of war undoubtedly contributed to his advocacy of preventive action against France in 1867 and against Russia in 1887 (Howard, fn. 26, p. 41). In the period prior to World War I, the perception by German and Austrian decision makers that war was inevitable (against France or Russia or both) was critical. German Chief of Staff Moltke, for example, said in 1912, "I believe a war to be unavoidable and: the sooner the better." This fatalism was shared by political leaders and the general public as well as by the military. See Fischer (fn. 8, 1961), 29-38; Fischer (fn. 8, 1975), 162; Albertini (fn. 8), vol. II, p. 610; vol. III, p. 441; Ritter (fn. 8), 107; Geiss (fn. 8), 41; Sidney B. Fay, *The Origins of the World War* (New York: Macmillan, 1928), Vol. I, p. 43; Lebow (fn. 9, 1981), 255-57.

38 In actuality, of course, victory and defeat constitute two ends of a continuous range of possible outcomes, each associated with an expected probability of occurrence and net cost or benefit. Note that the positive benefits from a victorious war may be a powerful incentive for war, but this would exist independently of declining power, and hence independently of the preventive motivation.

39 This hypothesis explains why weaker states rarely succumb to the preventive motivation. If we control for the fear of the future or degree of anticipated decline, this hypothesis is valid for only a restricted range of probabilities. If the expected probability of victory is too large, reflecting an enormous military advantage for the preventer over a weak but growing opponent, there is no immediate threat to one's position and fewer incentives for preventive action.
venter is the primary determinant of the expected probability of victory and its costs, other factors may also be important. Expectations regarding the possible intervention of other states, particularly great powers, may be critical. The diplomatic isolation of a strong and rising adversary is especially conducive to an incentive for prevention, as it reduces the costs and risks of defeat for the preventer. Great-power intervention in support of the stronger state—that is, a “preventive war” by a coalition—is much less likely, particularly if the stronger state is the leading state in the system. The stronger the leading state, the greater its general interest in maintaining the existing system, and the greater the incentives to provide the collective goods for all by taking on the challenger. Other great powers are less concerned with systemic interests than with their particular strategic, economic, and ideological interests in specific issues. They have an incentive to free-ride and let the leader handle the rising challenger. Moreover, the stronger the leading state, the greater the extent to which it, and not the rising challenger, is perceived by other states as the primary threat to their interests, and the greater the likelihood of a general coalition against the leading state. For these reasons, a consensus for collective action against the rising state is unlikely to form.

One factor that interacts with the dyadic military balance to affect the outcome of the war is the offensive/defensive balance of military technology, defined in terms of the degree of superiority needed by the attacker to overcome a defender. The greater the offensive advantage, the greater the potential advantage for a preventer who chooses to strike first, and hence the stronger the preventive motivation. This is particularly compelling if the offensive advantage is expected to persist into the future period of the adversary’s superiority, for that would increase the seriousness of the future threat. In addition, the actual conduct of a preventive war is facilitated by offensive military doctrines calling for territorial penetration; states facing a decline in relative military capabilities may adopt offensive doctrines for this reason.


Vagts (fn. 15, p. 290) argues that “preventive wars cannot easily be undertaken by an alliance or a coalition. Preventive wars are essentially wars of a single autocratic power acting alone or in absolute dominance within a coalition.” On the tendency for great powers to align against the leading state, to balance rather than bandwagon, see Waltz (fn. 35), 126-27; Stephen M. Walt, “Alliance Formation and the Balance of World Power,” *International Security* 9 (Spring 1985), 3-43. The main exception is a situation in which the rising challenger expounds a revolutionary ideology which is perceived by other great powers as a threat to their own internal stability as well as to their military superiority (for example, revolutionary France in 1792). See also fn. 13.

On the concept of the offensive/defensive balance, see Jack S. Levy, “The Offensive/De-
OTHER VARIABLES

Although the straightforward cost-benefit calculations provide a good approximation of the strength of the preventive motivation for war, they must be modified by other factors that may also have a significant impact. Among the most important are misperceptions, policy makers’ orientations toward risk and uncertainty, domestic politics, and the policy preferences and political influence of the military.

The expected probabilities of victory and defeat and their associated costs—and hence, the strength of the preventive motivation for war—are greatly affected by misperceptions. Decision makers often exaggerate their own military strength relative to that of the adversary; they therefore overestimate the probability of victory and underestimate its probable costs. They tend to underestimate the likelihood of third parties’ intervening on the side of their adversary and the likelihood of their own potential friends’ staying neutral. They also tend to underestimate the military strength and impact of adversaries who intervene, and to overestimate the impact of allies who do so. The sources of misperception have received considerable attention and do not need to be elaborated here. It is useful to note, however, that the conditions under which preventive action is often considered are particularly likely to generate misperceptions. The greater the deterioration in one’s position and the absence of alternative options, and, generally, the bleaker the future, the greater decision makers’ motivated biases to exaggerate the feasibility of war as a solution to their problems.\textsuperscript{43}

A decision to initiate a war for preventive purposes involves enormous risks and uncertainties, and the risk propensities of decision makers can have a significant impact.\textsuperscript{44} This issue is particularly complex because it


\textsuperscript{44} Risk refers to a situation in which the probabilities of different outcomes are known, whereas in a situation of uncertainty the probabilities of various outcomes are not known.
consists of two sets of risks and uncertainties: the uncertainties inherent in a war fought now and the uncertainties involved in delay. The first set involves the inability to predict precisely the probability of victory in a preventive war or its likely costs, including the risk of an expansion of the war. The second involves uncertainties regarding whether, and how far, one’s power position will continue to decline; the adversary’s intentions once he achieves superiority; one’s ability to secure diplomatic support or to appease the adversary successfully; and the likely costs of war in the worst case. It is not at all clear which set of risks and uncertainties will dominate. Will a risk-averse actor shy away from taking a preventive action because of the short-term risks? Or is such a war the risk-averse strategy in the face of the expected loss of one’s military superiority? A detailed analysis of risk and uncertainty and their consequences cannot be undertaken here, but a few conflicting tendencies should be mentioned.

First, because the range of outcomes and the number and magnitude of negative outcomes are greater in the future than in the present, risk-averse actors might have a tendency to prefer preventive action and risk-acceptant actors to prefer delay. This assumes that the expected utility of preventive war and delay are equal for risk-neutral actors. The argument is reinforced by some recent findings from experimental psychology: individuals tend to be risk-averse with respect to gains and risk-acceptant with respect to losses.\footnote{Given a choice between a certain gain $x$ and a lottery involving an expected value $y > x$ (in typical experiments $x$ and $y$ differ by 20-30%), individuals generally choose $x$; but given a choice between a certain loss $x$ and a lottery involving an expected value $y < x$, they choose to gamble and choose $y$. These findings are robust and contrary to the assumptions of expected-utility theory. They are generally explained by the tendency to give disproportionately high weight to nearly certain outcomes (the “certainty effect”), by the asymmetry of losses and gains and the steeper slope of loss curves, and by the tendency to frame the choice in terms of the status quo rather than of an absolute or arbitrary standard. See fn. 14. Also see John C. Hershey and Paul Schoemaker, “Risk Taking and Problem Context in the Domain of Losses; An Expected Utility Analysis,” \textit{Journal of Risk and Insurance} 47 (March 1980), 111-12; Robert Jervis, “War and Misperception,” \textit{Journal of Interdisciplinary History} 18 (Spring 1988).} To the extent that these rather robust findings regarding individual behavior are applicable to state decision making on security issues, we would expect that actors facing almost certain losses (military or diplomatic) resulting from declining military power would be inclined to accept a risky gamble in an attempt to avoid those losses—that is, to gamble on a preventive war in an attempt to halt or reverse their deteriorating situation.\footnote{This same experimental finding suggests that the rising state facing a near-certain future
Internal political considerations relating to risk orientation may point in the opposite direction. Decision makers know that they themselves must bear the costs of a war fought now, whereas the costs of delay can most likely be passed on to their successors. Risk-averse actors, particularly those sensitive to domestic political considerations, will prefer to avoid the risks of preventive war and to leave to their successors the problem of conducting foreign policy in an era of impending weakness. Perhaps this is the basis for Bernard Brodie’s assertion that the “willingness to gamble now at unlimited stakes for what is a highly speculative long-term gain,” which is so essential for preventive action, is “normally most uncharacteristic of politicians.” The relative strength of these opposing tendencies is, however, ultimately an empirical question.  

Bismarck’s aversion to preventive war appears to derive in part from a tendency to focus on immediate uncertainties and to react cautiously. Many of his statements in the public and documentary record refer to the inherent uncertainties involved in preventive war and the need to avoid them if at all possible. In one of his most widely quoted passages, Bismarck declared that “preventive war is like suicide from fear of death.” He rejected the notion that the danger of war in the future provided a justification for war in the present:

> The idea of undertaking a war because it might be inevitable later on and might then have to be fought under more unfavorable conditions has always remained foreign to me, and I have always fought against it. . . . For I cannot look into Providence’s cards in such a manner that I would know things beforehand.

Bismarck also stated, in a passage that reflects his fears of the uncertain dangers of a war now as well as the lack of certainty regarding the inevitability of a future war,

> We have to wait, rifle at rest, and see what smoke clouds and eruptions that volcano of Europe will bring forth. A policy like that of Frederick at the outset of the Seven Years’ War we shall not follow—suddenly attack the enemy who is preparing the attack. It seems, indeed, to break eggs out of which very dangerous chickens might arise.

Domestic political considerations may also affect the strength of the preventive motivation for war. Internal social and political change may be a major cause of a state’s decline in relative military power and poten-

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47 Brodie (fn. 15), 26.
48 Fischer (fn. 8, 1975), 377, 461; Vagts (fn. 15), 290-91. Bismarck’s interpretation of this case appears to refer more to preemption than to prevention.
tial, either directly or, more indirectly, through its adverse impact on economic productivity and comparative advantage. The internal sources of Austria’s decline in 1914, for example, were demographic, social, and political as much as economic. Similarly, the anticipated increase in Russia’s strength from 1914 to 1917, which was the basis for Germany’s preventive motivation for war, derived as much from the reorganization of the Russian army as from underlying economic and industrial changes in Russia.

The intensity of the preventive motivation may also be affected by bureaucratic political considerations, particularly the policy preferences of the military and their influence in the policy-making process. Pressures for preventive action are more likely to come from the military than from civilians. By professional training, they are more sensitive to military threats to their country’s security, more predisposed to worst-case analysis, more concerned about a long-term decline in military assets, and perhaps more willing to resort to extreme solutions in order to avert any further decline in military strength. Although military pressure alone is rarely a sufficient condition for preventive military action, it may be very nearly a necessary condition. It is unlikely that the preventive motivation could be strong in the face of military opposition; it would be difficult for civilians to overrule a collective military judgment that a preventive war would be too risky.

The political influence of the military is determined not only by the seriousness of the external threat to vital national interests, but also by institutional arrangements, by the belief systems and personalities of key individuals, and by political leaders’ expertise in and knowledge of military issues and planning. In the case of Germany before 1914, Klaus Epstein emphasizes the institutional weaknesses of the chancellor’s office under the Bismarckian constitution, Bethmann’s lack of personal strength and prestige, and the absence of a tradition of civilian supremacy over the military in German political culture. Bismarck himself wrote that the General Staff’s desire for preventive war was natural for such a military institution, and not necessarily a bad thing, but that he feared the

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49 Austrian Chief of Staff Conrad perceived that the nationality problem was dividing the army, and feared that in a country in which two-thirds of the population were Slavs, the army would soon no longer fight for Germans and Magyars. He questioned “whether we should wait until France and Russia were ready to attack us together or whether it was not more desirable to settle the inevitable conflict earlier.” Fischer (fn. 8, 1975), 398. See also Vagtis (fn. 15), 304; Ritter (fn. 8), 229-31.

50 Fischer (fn. 8, 1975), 371, 399; L.C.F. Turner, The Origins of the First World War (New York: Norton, 1970), 74. Domestic politics may affect the outbreak of war, of course, quite independently of the fear of one’s deteriorating international position. See fn. 28.

51 Samuel P. Huntington, The Soldier and the State (New York: Vintage, 1957), chap. 3; Richard K. Betts, Soldiers, Statesmen and Cold War Crises (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1977); Posen (fn. 42), chap. 2; Vagtis (fn. 15), 263.
possibility of an aggressive chief of staff in combination with a weak and incompetent monarch and a chancellor without political perspective or influence. The military cannot be viewed as a single actor, however, with respect to attitudes toward preventive war. There may be some divisions along organizational lines. While Moltke and the German army argued forcefully for war in 1911-12, for example, Tirpitz and the navy argued strongly for delay, and were able to persuade the kaiser to postpone military action.

The general attitude toward war in society may also influence the intensity of the preventive motivation. The greater the extent to which war is viewed in Clausewitzian terms as a legitimate instrument of policy for the attainment of a wide range of national political objectives (and not just as a policy of last resort when the territorial and constitutional integrity of the state is most directly and immediately threatened), the fewer the domestic political constraints inhibiting policy makers from resorting to force, and hence the stronger the preventive motivation. This attitude toward war may vary in different types of political systems.

SUMMARY AND CONCLUSIONS

The preventive motivation is an intervening variable between a state’s decline in relative military power and potential and a decision for war. It is neither a necessary nor a sufficient condition for war, but contributes


On several occasions, Bismarck blocked military demands for preventive war. After he departed as chancellor in 1890, the German military gradually gained the upper hand. Although military pressures for preventive war were rejected in the crises of 1905, 1909, and 1912, these pressures had become much stronger in 1914. The political influence of the military was also greater in part because of the ignorance of military issues and planning by political leaders, and the resulting tendency to defer to the military on security issues. See George F. Kennan, The Decline of Bismarck’s European Order (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1979), 364-66; Gordon A. Craig, The Politics of the Prussian Army, 1640-1945 (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1955), chap. 7; Fischer (fn. 8, 1961, 1975); Geiss (fn. 8), 38-48; Berghahn (fn. 28), chap. 9; Jack S. Levy, “Organizational Routines and the Causes of War,” International Studies Quarterly 30 (June 1986), 193-222.

54 Divisions over preventive war may also follow generational lines, with the younger military officers being the most eager. Vagts (fn. 15, pp. 291, 306-8), argues that this was true for both Germany and Austria in the decades prior to World War I. See also Ritter (fn. 8), 308.

55 This variable is potentially important but conceptually difficult, and is generally neglected. See Lebow (fn. 9, 1981), 247-54. Although the question whether democratic states are less war-prone than nondemocratic states has yet to be answered conclusively (though democracies almost never fight other democracies), it is not unreasonable to hypothesize that the preventive motivation for war is less intense in democratic states. See Steve Chan, “Mirror, Mirror on the Wall... Are the Freer Countries More Pacifist?” Journal of Conflict Resolution 28 (December 1984), 617-48.
to war in combination with other variables and other causal sequences. In this study, I have been more interested in developing a comprehensive explanatory framework for the analysis of the preventive motivation for war than in constructing a parsimonious and easily testable model. Consequently, I have not conducted a systematic empirical analysis to determine the frequency with which power shifts and the preventive motivation are associated with war, and have not empirically tested my hypotheses regarding the conditions affecting the intensity of the preventive motivation. It would be useful, however, to note briefly how such a model might be tested.

A preliminary test might focus, not on the individual hypotheses themselves, but on the causal sequence as a whole; it would examine the empirical association between dyadic power shifts and the outbreak of war, ignoring for the moment the role of perceptual and internal political variables. Given existing data on war and military capabilities, it would be possible to conduct a quantitative test of the simple power shift hypothesis for all dyads or for major power dyads for the period since 1815. The theoretical literature implies, however, that power transitions between the leading states in the system are particularly important. Because there are relative few cases of such transitions and of major wars since 1815, it would be necessary to extend the temporal domain of the study back in time to permit the analysis of additional cases. A useful starting point would be about 1500, for a number of historical and theoretical studies identify this as the beginning of the modern system. Although adequate war data do exist for this period, there are no data on major power military capabilities prior to 1815. The collection of such data would be of enormous theoretical value, but the task of constructing valid indicators of military capabilities over five centuries would be difficult, and the actual collection of the data would be time-consuming and expensive. A less rigorous test of many of the above-mentioned hypotheses through a methodology of structured focused comparison would be a more immediately feasible alternative. A modest number of cases of power shifts, or decision points within the same power shift, could be examined in order to determine the conditions under which power shifts are most likely to lead to war.

The war and capability data for the post-1815 period are from J. David Singer's Correlates of War project, available at the Inter-University Consortium for Political and Social Research at the University of Michigan. For war data spanning the last five centuries and a justification of the temporal extension of the system, see Jack S. Levy, War in the Modern Great Power System, 1495-1975 (Lexington: University Press of Kentucky, 1983).

Such an analysis would bear on the question of the sufficient conditions for war; a complete analysis would also have to consider necessary conditions and to include cases of unchanging power differentials.
A related question—which has been mentioned but not resolved in this study, and which requires further theoretical and ultimately empirical analysis—concerns the conditions under which declining states choose to provide for their future security through alliances, an expanded armaments program, or other internal changes rather than through preventive military action. This leads to the more general questions of the conditions of peaceful systemic change, and what a rising state might do to reduce the pressure on the declining leader for preventive military action. These questions are, of course, important for contemporary policy as well as for theory.