British Grand Strategy and the Rise of Germany, 1933–1936

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The diplomacy of the 1930s has always been of great interest to international relations scholars – as a paradigmatic case of appeasement, of the consequence of an economic depression for international security, of the decisive role of individuals in international politics, and of the impact of ideology on foreign policy goals, among other things. The revival of interest in balance-of-power theory in the last fifteen years or so has generated further interest in the 1930s, because the decade is typically understood as a classic case of “underbalancing” (in this case significantly delayed balancing) against a rising hegemonic threat. Conventional wisdom offers several different explanations for Western (particularly British) underbalancing behavior. Early explanations put the blame squarely on British decision makers for misunderstanding the nature of the German challenge. One variation of this “guilty men” theme emphasized misperceptions of the German threat and the naïve belief that Hitler’s grievances could be satisfied through concessions. Others also alleged British sympathy with the legitimacy of German grievances. Still others claimed that the British government had abandoned balance-of-power thinking after World War I and, consequently, did not think


seriously of a strategy of balancing or preventive war in response to the German challenge.\(^4\)

In the last thirty-five years, with the opening of new archival documents, a “revisionist” school emerged that rejected these “guilty men” arguments, instead blaming international and domestic constraints on effective counterbalancing. Revisionist arguments traced British and French policy to military unpreparedness, the fragility of their economies, the British need to deal with multiple threats to British interests emanating from Japan in the Far East and from Italy in the Mediterranean, and opposition from the British public and financial interests in the City of London to any policy that involved rearmament, higher taxes, or the risk of war with Germany.\(^5\) Political scientists have recently joined these debates and emphasized the role of domestic politics, domestic political economy, ideology, and strategic calculation.\(^6\) It still remains embedded in the conventional wisdom, however, that British leaders misunderstood the extent and nature of the German threat and that they believed that Hitler’s challenges could be managed through strategic concessions.\(^7\)

Like Silverstone in his contribution on British grand strategy in the 1920s (Chapter 3 in this volume), we challenge this assumption in this chapter about British grand strategy in the 1930s.

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\(^4\) This argument persisted into the “revisionist” era. See, for example, Edward W. Bennett, *German Rearmament and the West, 1922–1933* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1979), 105, 380, and 510.


\(^7\) A purely strategic argument is made in Christopher Layne, “Security Studies and the Use of History: Neville Chamberlain’s Grand Strategy Revisited,” *Security Studies*, 17, no. 3 (July 2008), 397–437.


\(^9\) We treat preventive war as a strategy – rather than a type of war – one distinct from preemption and other sources of better-now-than-later logic. Preventive war strategies are motivated by the fear of war – or of the concessions expected to be necessary to avoid war – under worse circumstances later. Better-now-than-later logic and the preventive motivation is a causal path (but not the only one) intervening between adverse power shifts and military strategies. We focus on perceptions of rising power rather than on objective indicators of power and changing power. On these and other conceptual issues, see Jack S. Levy, “Preventive War and Democratic Politics,” *International Studies Quarterly* 52, no. 1 (March 2008), 1–24.

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of empirically confirmed, conditional generalizations that specify which kinds of states, facing which kinds of rising adversaries, adopt preventive military strategies, and under what conditions. This is a serious omission, because narrowing power differentials do not usually lead to preventive attacks. Any theory of preventive war must explain both when states respond to adverse power shifts with military force and when they adopt some other strategy, including inaction. The failure to examine “negative cases,” in which power shifts do not lead to preventive war strategies, constitutes a serious selection bias in the literature.

Perhaps the most plausible set of hypotheses on power shifts and preventive military responses is that states are most likely to adopt preventive war strategies in response to a rising challenger if they perceive that the adversary is rapidly rising, hostile, and likely to surpass them in military strength and then resort to military force, or the threat thereof, to settle grievances or otherwise advance its interests. If these hypotheses are correct, the most serious empirical anomaly for the theory of preventive war is British and French apparent inaction in the 1930s. Few states in history have risen as rapidly in relative power as Germany from Hitler’s ascension to power in 1933 to the outbreak of World War II in 1939. Hitler’s Germany was also quite hostile, although as discussed in the introductory chapter, the magnitude of the hostility might be clearer in retrospect than at the time. Many analysts argue that Britain and France would have been better off fighting Germany earlier rather than waiting until Germany’s invasion of Poland in 1939. Yet why did British and French leaders make great efforts to avoid a military confrontation? The answer to this question has important implications for international relations theory, for the international history of the 1930s, and for policy makers.


The anomalous status of the 1930s for the theory of preventive war led us to undertake a detailed analysis regarding the crises over the Rhineland in 1936 and Czechoslovakia in 1938 (the two most likely decision points for military action against Germany), with the aim of explaining the absence of a military response to the rise of Germany. We argued in these articles that French political leaders wanted to take a firmer stance against Germany – even at the risk of war – at the time of the Munich crisis in 1938, and leaned in that direction in 1936, but were not willing to act without British support. We argue that British leaders were unwilling to confront Germany in either crisis because they believed that Germany had already surpassed Britain and France in military strength, that Britain was particularly vulnerable to an attack from the air in 1938, and that consequently a war would be too costly. They believed, however, that the underlying trends in military power, which could be accelerated by British rearmament, pointed to both a reversal in the balance of power and enhanced British security against an air attack within a few years.

Britain and France thus had opposing beliefs about the current balance of power and how it was likely to change, and these divergent beliefs led to divergent grand strategies. The French believed that the time was ripe to confront Germany, even at the risk of war, and that the situation would only get worse. They were driven by better-now-than-later logic to prefer a strategy of military confrontation or preventive war. The British, in contrast, believed that it was already too late to fight but that the situation would improve. A better-later-than-now logic led British leaders to delay a military confrontation while they prepared for war. The premises of hypotheses on preventive war (perceptions of a rising adversary) apply to France, whose policy preferences were consistent with predicted outcomes, but not to Britain, so British behavior from 1936 to 1938 does not bear directly on hypotheses on preventive war.


14 Our findings were reinforced by our more detailed study of British appeasement policies from 1936 to 1938. Norrin M. Ripsman and Jack S. Levy, “Wishful Thinking or Buying Time? The Logic of British Appeasement in the 1930s,” International Security 33, no. 2 (Fall 2008), 148–181.

As Silverstone discusses in Chapter 3 of this volume, British and French policies toward Germany had differed since the signing of the Versailles Treaty.

Our explanation for the puzzle of British and French inaction during the mid-to-late 1930s only shifts the question back to an earlier period. If the absence of a military confrontation against Nazi Germany in the mid-to-late 1930s was a result of the British belief that Germany was too strong (and of French dependence on Britain), then why did Britain and France not respond more firmly to the rise of Hitler and to German rearmament before 1936, while the balance of power still favored the western allies? In this chapter, we focus on Britain, and ask why British leaders did not respond more firmly to the rising power of Nazi Germany before 1936 — either through a containment strategy based on some combination of internal military builds and external alliances, or perhaps through a more aggressive strategy based on coercive threats or even preventive military action. Our analysis is based on both secondary sources and on British government documents and private papers.

The British Response to German Rearmament, 1933–1936

Our approach to the case studies was to address the following questions. (1) How seriously did British leaders regard the German threat? (2) Were they aware of illegal German rearmament, or did they miscalculate the rate of the impending rise in German power? (3) Did British leaders seriously consider a confrontational strategy against Germany, perhaps including a strategy of preventive war, to block or limit the rise of German power? (4) If so, why did they ultimately decide against a military response to the growing German threat? In the process of addressing these questions, we also consider how British leaders assessed the existing distribution of power and anticipated changes in the distribution of power, as well as the role that French capabilities and other potential allies played in British calculations of relative power and readiness for war.

Our argument is that the British government was quite concerned about the appreciation of German power and German rearmament. Nonetheless, British leaders gave little consideration to the possibility of a preventive war, primarily because British military assessments consistently asserted that Great Britain would not be ready for war for several years. On the few occasions when the issue of preventive war did arise, it was in the context of the possibility of a French preventive war to block the rise of German power, which British political and military leaders made every effort to discourage. They questioned whether such a war could succeed without creating a host of other problems. They also feared that such a war would prove very costly for Britain if it were forced to intervene to defend France, especially given the fragile state of the British economy, the general unpreparedness of the British military, the problem that a European war would create for the defense of the empire, the possibility that such a war would lead to Bolshevism in Germany, and, to a lesser extent, the war-weary public’s preference for a negotiated solution. British leaders hoped, therefore, to avoid war and forestall the threatening growth of German power through disarmament negotiations, keeping a military response in a few years’ time as an option of last resort.

The German challenges to the Versailles settlement predated Hitler’s rise to power. As part of the Brest-Litovsk treaty, the Germans had already begun to train armed forces in the Soviet Union in violation of the Versailles Treaty as of the late 1920s. Given this worrisome development, the British were pleased that Germany agreed to reenter the disarmament conference in December 1932 after the Weimar regime had withdrawn in protest earlier in the year, but they were concerned about its potential failure. When Hitler came to power in March 1933, the British Cabinet feared that Hitler would scuttle the disarmament conference in Geneva, which would have grave consequences for the situation in Europe.16

16 Letter from the head of the UK delegation to the League of Nations to Stanley Baldwin, March 12, 1933, Papers of Stanley Baldwin, Cambridge University Library, Cambridge, UK, 121, 12; Cabinet 33 (33), May 5, 1933 — CAB 23/76, 59.

17 “The Crisis in Europe,” C.P. 52 (33), February 28, 1933 — CAB 24/239, 10–11.
By May 1933, after German obstinacy at the Geneva disarmament conference, the institution of military training in Germany, and Nazi agitation in Danzig, Austria, and the Saar, Simon became more certain that Hitler was preparing an illegal military force for an eventual war to recapture German territories lost in World War I. Moreover, Simon concluded, even if the Führer appeared to be willing to moderate his policies in the face of a concerted British and French warning, “we should always have to count with the possibility that it was merely a temporary retreat – un recul pour mieux sauter.” Therefore, Simon advised the government to plan for one of two possibilities if the Nazi Party were to remain in power: either a preventive war initiated by the French (which the Foreign Secretary believed was unlikely) or “the success of Hitler, followed – if present Nazi dispositions are maintained – by a European war in four or five years time.”

On another occasion, Simon described German foreign policy as “definitely disquieting.” In his view, “the Government of Germany, for the first time since the War, are giving State sanction and encouragement to an attitude of mind, as well as to various forms of military training, which could end in only one way.” By 1935, Simon was warning the Prime Minister that the rapid expansion of the German air force meant that “this country is seriously open to the threat of sudden attack by a Continental Power, in a degree to which it has not been exposed for hundreds of years.” Thus, while Simon has been accused of not having any clear idea of how to respond to the German threat, he clearly believed that the growth of German power threatened British security.

Permanent Undersecretary for Foreign Affairs Sir Robert Vansittart similarly warned, in a prescient memo that Simon presented to the Cabinet:

From the very outset of the new regime in Germany, I have felt, with all deference to those who with more sweet reasonableness were disposed for at least a little to wait and see, that there was no doubt whatsoever about the ultimate intentions of the Nazis. . . . It is an open secret that anything peaceful said by Hitler is merely for foreign consumption and designed to gain time . . . Hitler's disarmament speech was a unique event, a solitary exception not only in his own history, but in that of his party, in which he would have lost ground but for the fact that no German has

19 Cabinet 35 (33), May 17, 1933 – CAB 23/76, 88.
21 See, for example, Michael Hughes, British Foreign Secretaries in an Uncertain World, 1919–1939 (New York: Routledge, 2006), 118–119.
23 Cabinet 50 (33), September 5, 1933 – CAB 23/77, 10.
By late 1934, however, it was quite clear to the Cabinet, from a variety of military sources, "that German re-armament was proceeding in an alarming manner," as the regular German armed forces were approaching 300,000 men (with 400,000 trained reservists) plus a 120,000-man SS, as opposed to the 100,000 men allowed by the Versailles Treaty, and was well on its way to an air force that rivaled the Royal Air Force in size. 28 As also discussed by Lobell in Chapter 6 of this volume, the military establishment was particularly fearful of the growth of German air power, which had by 1935 far exceeded initial British expectations and raised fears that Germany could launch a "knock-out air attack against Britain." 29

Significantly, throughout the period under investigation, the War Office prepared regular reports on the state of German rearmament for the Committee on Imperial Defence (CID), which consisted of the central Cabinet ministers charged with foreign security policy together with the military chiefs of staff. Clearly, the fact of German rearmament and an impending power transition had not escaped the British government's attention, even if the British intelligence apparatus had initially underestimated its scale and pace. 30

From an analysis of British documents, it would appear that the British did not give much consideration to a strategy of preventive war against Germany. 31 There were several reasons for this. To begin with, the Cabinet and the Chiefs of Staff viewed war as something a country was either prepared for or not, based more on monadic calculations rather than dyadic calculations of the relative preparedness of the two countries. In their view, because of progressive British disarmament and defense budget reductions after World War I, the British military was simply not ready to wage war against Germany and would not be prepared until, at the earliest, 1938. 32

Specifically, the Cabinet and the Chiefs of Staff viewed several key shortcomings in the early to mid-1930s, including providing for coastal defenses, maintaining a margin of naval superiority over Germany, matching the German air force expansion, and equipping a Field Force to prevent the German occupation of the Low Countries. They estimated it would take at least a few years to redress these critical weaknesses. 33 In addition, they estimated that, given funding constraints, their inadequate air defenses could not be effectively remedied until the 1940s at the earliest, 34 and that coastal defenses might not be adequate for decades. 35 As a result, they did not yet consider that they were prepared for war with Germany and conducted relative power assessments and war planning using 1939 projections of the balance of forces, rather than current ones. 36 Therefore, they simply did not consider the potential for preventive war; they were not willing to contemplate war until the country was ready.

Moreover, the need for immediate action was tempered by the Chiefs of Staff estimate that Germany would not be ready for war until, at

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33 The upgrade of British air defenses was viewed as an immediate priority, but so were matching the German air force expansion, maintaining naval superiority to protect British coastal waters and shipping, and equipping a Field Force to prevent the German occupation of the Low Countries. Moreover, in a climate of extreme financial constraints, in which the budget for redressing the years of underfunding due to the Ten-Year Rule was halved for five years, it would take time to address these deficiencies. "Re-orientation of the Air Defence System of Great Britain," Report by the Chiefs of Staff Sub-Committee, May 14, 1935 - CAB 3/6, 209, 57.

34 The Home Defence Sub-Committee of the CID noted that the first of three stages of air defenses, including antiaircraft guns and searchlights, would be completed by 1940, and would provide only a partial defense of Southeast England only. The second stage, as originally planned and funded, would provide "a considerable proportion of the anti-aircraft guns required for the complete scheme and a measure of the searchlight equipment throughout the length of the defences for the essential co-operation with defending fighter aircraft in night defence" by 1945! "Re-orientation of the Air Defence System of Great Britain," Memorandum by the Home Defence Sub-Committee of the Committee of Imperial Defence, April 11, 1935 - CAB 3/6, 205, 14.

35 The CID noted that, given funding constraints, it would be "necessary to extend the period of time in which the coast defence of the United Kingdom should be completed from a 45-year to a 160-year programme"! Minutes of the 269th meeting of the CID, April 16, 1935 - CAB 2/6, 97.

36 See, for example, "Defence Plans for the Event of War with Germany, Provisional Report," Committee of Imperial Defence, Joint Planning Sub-committee of the Chiefs of Staff Sub-committee report, October 31, 1935 - CAB 55/7, 54-75.
the very earliest, 1938, but probably a year or two thereafter. Thus, for example, in October 1933, the War Office noted that Germany had already raised an army of 1,500,000, but lacked the “trained leaders, artillery and technical units” to be an effective military force in the short term. Moreover, the Germans would not be in a favorable position vis-à-vis France, Britain, and likely allies with respect to air power for several years. A year later, the Chiefs of Staff subcommittee of the CID reported in November 1934 “that if Germany chose to go to war before the expiration of five years, they, like ourselves, would not be fully prepared for it in a military sense”; therefore, it was not realistic to expect war before 1939.

This conclusion was reinforced by the perception, frequently noted in General Staff documents, that the scope of German rearmament until 1936 still appeared “defensive” in nature, especially given that the numbers did not greatly outstrip French forces, the Germans had not yet begun to produce heavy artillery in great numbers, and the French frontier was heavily fortified. This conclusion was also reinforced by doubts that Germany would be able to maintain its torrid pace of rearmament without encountering raw materials shortages and domestic political opposition if it continued to divert resources from the domestic economy into the military.

On top of this consideration, the War Office did not expect the German advantage to endure for very long, as the fruits of British and allied rearmament would further the balance in favor of Great Britain and its allies. In this regard, the Military Intelligence General Staff opined, it is difficult to imagine that in 1939 the European situation will be such that Germany will be able to concentrate her whole strength in the West and that her

eastern frontiers do not entail any military measures other than those necessary from a purely preoccupation point of view... Germany will almost certainly have to maintain strong forces for the security of her eastern frontiers, but by 1939 she will not have sufficient forces to risk a war on two fronts... We do not think that by 1939 Germany will be in such a state of war-preparedness that she can engage in war against the United Kingdom, France, Belgium and possibly Holland with a reasonable chance of success.

In fact, British military projections in June 1935 estimated that, in the event of war in 1939, after British rearmament had been given time, the balance of ground forces between the German bloc and the Franco-British bloc would be “72 Allied divisions against Germany’s 52–57, a superiority of 4 to 3.”

Moreover, to the extent that the government contemplated war with Germany in the early 1930s, it believed that war would be very costly in several respects. First, the Cabinet was concerned about the economic cost of a strong response against Germany. The British economy had been weakened considerably by World War I, and the country was heavily indebted to the United States. As a result, the government was eager to avoid measures that risked overtaxing the Treasury. Consequently, when the Cabinet considered the implications of German rearmament and a possible German push in Austria in September 1933, Chancellor of the Exchequer Neville Chamberlain argued that even economic sanctions against Germany were inadvisable because they would reduce German payments to the United Kingdom, which would, in turn, undermine the British capacity to make payments to the United States. The use of force, although not directly addressed at the meeting, would no doubt have had even more profound economic consequences.

Indeed, in a very reflective letter to Vansittart, Simon noted that the political and economic costs of rearmament and war would be heavy, which is why it was better to do whatever was necessary to achieve a disarmament agreement. In essence, the British viewed their options as negotiating a disarmament agreement or fighting an eventual costly war.

43 Note by the General Staff of M13, February 28, 1935 – WO 190/303, 2.
45 See, for example, Peden, British Rerarmament and the Treasury, 1932–1939 (Edinburgh: Scottish Academic Press, 1979); Scott Newton, "The 'Anglo-German Connection' and the Political Economy of Appeasement," Diplomacy & Statecraft 2, no. 3 (1991), 178–207; Wende, Economic Appeasement — A Crisis Strategy; and Steven Lobell’s chapter in this volume.
46 Cabinet 30 (33), September 5, 1933 – CAB 23/77, 9.
This logic was reinforced by strategic conditions. As in World War I, Great Britain was not in a position to deliver a knockout blow against Germany. Instead, its strategy must be to prevent Germany from landing a knockout blow by air and then rely on a protracted blockade and a long war, which landlocked Germany would find difficult to sustain. Consequently, it was essential not to undermine British economic strength through premature war or overly rapid rearmament, as this would hurt the British ability to sustain a protracted and draining war. Thus, until 1935, when the massive scale of German borrowing made clear it that a balanced-budget approach to British rearmament could not be expected to keep pace with Germany, the Cabinet’s priority was to rearm slowly, which effectively closed out the option of preventive war.

Second, the British public, still weary from the experience of World War I, was heavily pacifist and unwilling to wage war. The government—a “National Government” coalition of Conservatives, Liberals, National Labourites, and independents—thus feared the political costs that would result from rearmament and war. As Simon explained to Vansittart in December 1933, “If things go as badly as all this we shall have to rearm. It will cost a terrible lot of money and will be a new stimulus to the opposition to turn the National Government out.” The public was heavily committed to the disarmament talks as a way of resolving international tensions and, in Simon’s view, “The loss of credit which the British Government would suffer in the eyes of the public if there is no international agreement which can be called a disarmament convention will be something tremendous.” Hence, while the government was unwilling to sacrifice British strategic priorities to pacifism, it had domestic incentives to contain the growth of German power without a war if that were at all possible.

Third, and perhaps most importantly, a preventive use of force against Germany could not be considered in a vacuum. Given the systematic underfunding of the British armed forces since World War I, there was reason to fear that channeling available resources into a confrontation with Germany would leave the British Empire at risk. In this context, it is noteworthy that, despite having recognized the pending German threat, the attention of British military planners in 1933 and 1934 was primarily focused on the Japanese withdrawal from the League of Nations and its aggression in Korea and Manchuria, which compelled them to fear Japanese attacks against Hong Kong, Singapore, Persian oil fields, and even the Suez canal. While Germany posed a serious long-term challenge, a Japanese attack in the short term could paralyze British control of the empire. Moreover, a war with Germany could invite Japanese aggression. As C. W. Orde, head of the Foreign Office’s Far Eastern Department, warned the Defence Requirements Committee, “I think we shall always have to reckon with the possibility of a Japanese attack, unless we are fully prepared to meet it, if we are at any time engaged in war or seriously threatened with it with another important power.” Thus it made sense to prepare for the more imminent threat and worry about Germany later.

In 1935, when planning for war with Germany took more definite shape, the specter of Japanese intervention continued to haunt British
military planners. Indeed, in October 1935, the Chiefs of Staff Joint Planning Sub-committee warned that Japan would probably use the opportunity of a British war against Germany to challenge British possessions abroad, which presented Britain with a naval dilemma: "Although the combined British and French Fleets are greatly superior to that of Germany, the protection of our vital home terminals could not be mainly entrusted to a foreign Power, nor would public opinion be likely to countenance the detachment of any considerable portion of the Fleet to the Far East at our present standard of naval power." Therefore, war with Germany would probably entail dire consequences for the British Empire unless the United States declared war on Japan.

Nowhere is the connection between appeasement of Germany and the risk to the empire associated with preventive war made more explicit than in the Third Report of the Defence Requirements Committee. The committee concluded that,

In view of the urgent need of peace and the grave dangers to which this country, its Capital, and the whole Empire, would be exposed in the event of a breach of peace in Western Europe, to say nothing of the danger of its extension to the Far East, we consider that we should respond as favourably as circumstances permit—though circumstances are likely to impose a concrete limit—to Herr Hitler's attitude, and do everything we can, in conjunction with France, to promote and maintain friendly relations with Germany.

Thus war must be avoided with Germany in the short run, when it posed only limited dangers, in order to prevent an immediate catastrophe in the Far East.

Another disadvantage of preventive war from the British point of view was the risk that it would have led to a communist regime in Germany. As the General Staff commented in June 1935:

The opportunity to keep Germany down by force for a further period of years, was lost, when France refused to join Poland in a preventative war to crush Germany in the Spring of 1933 (This we cannot regard as a misfortune from the point of view of British defence policy, as the crushing of Nazi Germany in 1933, would inevitably have led to the establishment of a communist regime in Germany, and the consequent strengthening of the forces of world revolution.)

As far as a preventive war against Germany in 1935 was concerned, the General Staff concluded, "Even if the Franco-Russian block, or a League war, succeeded in finally crushing Germany, we should be faced with a ruined and devastated Europe, an easy prey to Bolshevism. The only real victor would be the Soviet Government and the Third International." Under these circumstances, the British strategy was to try at all costs to find a manageable solution to German rearmament within the context of a disarmament convention, even if that meant making concessions to the German principle of equality, thereby legitimizing some degree of German rearmament. For this reason, the British were much more willing to compromise with Hitler on rearmament than the French were. Simon, Baldwin, and others in the Cabinet clearly preferred agreed limits to German power, if possible, over a costly war, which was viewed as the inevitable result of the failure to reach an agreement to limit German power. When this option failed, the Cabinet began to take other measures—principally British rearmament—to redress the German threat. They were not, however, prepared to consider a preventive war, because by the time the British had given up on nonmilitary options, Germany had rearmed faster than British experts had expected and had already jumped past the point at which a substantially disarmed Great Britain could use force effectively and efficiently to retard its growth. As an important June 1935 General Staff memorandum asserted, "German re-armament, although not yet complete, has by now made Germany"

56 In other words, the British did not feel they could rely on the French navy to any significant extent. "Defence Plans for the Event of War with Germany, Provisional Report," Committee of Imperial Defence, Joint Planning Sub-committee of the Chiefs of Staff Sub-committee report, October 31, 1935—CAB 55/7, 40.


60 See, for example, Cabinet 23 (33), March 22, 1933—CAB 23/75, 326–327; Cabinet 39 (33), June 9, 1933—CAB 23/76, 166.

61 As Billy Gore, First Commissioner of Works and a member of the British delegation to the disarmament talks, wrote to Lord President Stanley Baldwin, who held a symbolic post but, as leader of the majority Conservatives within the coalition, was the real power broker of the National Government: "Failure of the disarmament conference now would certainly mean the end [sic] of the League—and not only that, but a great deal more. It must be followed by a preventive war...It is 'success' in that conference or war." Gore to Baldwin, October 13, 1933, 4–5, Papers of Stanley Baldwin, Cambridge University Library, Cambridge, UK, 121, 76. Simon, too, told the Cabinet that if the Germans left the conference and rearmed, that "appeared to lead the Powers to a dilemma between a preventive war or war with Germany when she was armed." Cabinet 52 (33), October 9, 1933—CAB 23/77, 50.

62 See, for example, Cabinet Conclusions 10 (34), conclusion 3, March 19, 1934.

63 The War Office noted, for example, that Germany had expanded its army by more than five divisions (two armored, three infantry) in seven months between April and November 1935, or considerably faster than the anticipated rate of growth. "The German Army—Its Present Strength and Possible Rate of Expansion in Peace and War," War Office Memorandum, January 1936—WO 190/379, 4. See also Gibbs, Grand Strategy, 135–137; Wesley K. Wark, The Ultimate Enemy: British Intelligence and Nazi Germany, 1933–1939 (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1985), 51.
sufficiently strong to deter any thoughts of preventive war under existing conditions.”

**Conclusion**

This study has important implications both for key historical debates about British grand strategy in the 1930s and for the theoretical analysis of preventive war. With respect to the former, it provides further support for recent literature arguing that the strategy of appeasement was based on an assessment of relative capabilities, key threats, and strategic trajectories rather than on a naive view of the German threat and wishful thinking about the future. British decision makers did not shy away from a challenge of Germany because they believed Hitler’s aims were benign or limited, but because they believed they lacked the means to wage war and assumed that a war in the early to mid-1930s posed unacceptable risks to the Empire, the British economy, and the British Isles themselves. In other words, although Scott Silverstone argues in this volume that Britain faced a permissive international environment in the 1920s, by the early to mid-1930s, British leaders recognized that, with the accession of Hitler to power and rapid German rearmament, Britain faced a far more restrictive international environment. Nonetheless, until they were able to generate the means to navigate this threatening environment, they needed to eschew any strategy that risked a disastrous war.

Our analysis also challenges the arguments of Mark Haas (Chapter 11 in this volume, as well as elsewhere), Randall Schweller, and Kevin Narizny, who explain British appeasement of Germany in terms of domestic politics, political economic cleavages, or the dominant class in Great Britain’s ideological preference for Nazi Germany over the Soviet Union. British leaders were quite concerned about the threat that German rearmament presented to British strategic interests, and they viewed Germany — rather than the Soviet Union or Japan — as the ultimate enemy. Ideology, therefore, did not cloud their strategic judgment. Although domestic political concerns were relevant, they did not drive decision making, which was focused on the inadequate British defenses and armed forces.

Finally, we find modest support for the argument Lobell presents in this volume, that the British focused on and balanced against only certain components of adversary power, principally German air power and Japanese naval power. The British certainly were most concerned about Japanese naval power in the short run, which would allow Japan to exploit a war with Great Britain’s primary threat, Germany, at the expense of the Empire. In addition, British leaders were fearful of the growing Luftwaffe, which threatened to grow at a faster pace than British and French air power combined. Yet, they were also concerned about German naval power, which could threaten not only vital British commerce, but also its relatively weak coastal defenses, especially given the high percentage of the Royal Navy concentrated far from home in Mediterranean and overseas waters. This fear at least partly explains British willingness to limit German Navy expansion through the Anglo-German Naval Treaty. Thus, although we agree that British leaders focused on the components of adversary power that were most threatening to them, we would not cast the net as narrowly as Lobell does.

With respect to broader theoretical issues, this study reminds us that preventive war is but one strategy for dealing with a rising adversary. Other options include building up armaments or securing allies to balance against the adversary’s growing strength, or reaching a negotiated settlement to limit the adversary’s growth. Which option, or combination of options, a threatened state chooses is likely to depend on the feasibility, costs, and likely success both of alternative strategies and of preventive war, as well as the expected time frame of the transition. In Great Britain’s case, a strategy of preventive war was not a desirable alternative in the early 1930s because of its high economic costs, domestic political opposition, and the disastrous effect it was expected to have on imperial defense. Therefore, because British leaders believed that they had a few years before German rearmament posed an immediate danger, they preferred to give the negotiated framework of the disarmament conference a chance to contain the growth of German power at a more acceptable cost.

Second, as we note elsewhere, the decision to use force to forestall an adversary’s rise must be considered not merely in a bilateral context,
but also a broader strategic one. For the British, the vulnerability of imperial holdings in Asia to other adversaries (primarily Japan) served as a major constraint on a strategy of preventive war against Germany. If the British had devoted the necessary military resources to combating German rearmament, that would have left key strategic outposts, such as Singapore, at Japan’s mercy.

Third, the likelihood that a state will adopt a strategy of preventive war depends on its perceptions of the certainty and durability of a power transition. Trajectories of relative power are not always linear. British political and military leaders agreed that Germany had already surpassed Britain, but they were uncertain about Germany’s ability to sustain its torrid pace of rearmament. They anticipated that Germany’s advantage would not endure long, as British rearmament efforts would ultimately enable Great Britain and its allies to surpass Germany and its allies once again in aggregate capabilities. With these expectations, the adversary’s rise in power did not necessarily constitute a threat requiring an immediate war based on preventive logic.

Fourth, because “prevention” is not automatic, but requires the responder to select the use of force from the menu of other policy options, the speed of the adversary’s power transition can affect the likelihood that preventive war occurs. In this case, because the British armed forces were so badly weakened and underfunded in the post–World War I environment, a rapid and covert German rearmament effort was sufficient to catch up to Great Britain (or at least persuade British leaders that it had caught up, which is all that mattered) in a relatively short period of time. This, in conjunction with Britain’s early selection of other responses (principally attempts to limit German rearmament within the confines of the disarmament conference), effectively closed the window of opportunity for preventive military action, even if the British had been willing to consider that option.

Fifth, although Schweller (1992) goes too far in saying that democratic institutions and political cultures prevent democracies from fighting preventive wars except against much weaker states, and although others go even further in asserting that democracies never fight preventive wars against any opponents, we must recognize that domestic factors can still influence political leaders’ decisions to adopt preventive war strategies. The case of Britain in the early and mid-1930s suggests that domestic opposition to the use of force increases the incentives for democratic leaders to explore other policy options for dealing with a rising adversary, and can relegate preventive war to a strategy of last resort.

In the early 1930s, public opposition to war did not preclude British leaders from adopting a preventive war strategy, but it led them to prefer a diplomatic solution, and to make every effort to achieve one, while recognizing that war might be necessary were disarmament talks to fail. By the time disarmament talks had collapsed, however, the delay had allowed German strength to reach the point where preventive war entailed too many costs and risks. We can conclude, then, that although public pacifism may have reinforced British incentives to seek nonmilitary alternatives to a preventive war strategy, a diplomatic response would have been forthcoming even in the absence of public opposition to war, owing to economic disarray and the vulnerability of the British Empire.

Finally, and in some ways most challenging to standard conceptions of preventive war (and to neorealism theory as well), was our rather surprising finding that calculations of relative power did not dominate British decision making on the issue of war and peace in the early 1930s. In the first instance, the British military establishment conceived of preparedness for war in absolute rather than relative terms—that is, with respect to its own economic and military capabilities and with minimal regard for those of the adversary. In other words, before British leaders were convinced that they had sufficient capabilities in absolute terms to wage a war, considerations of relative capabilities were deemed irrelevant. Once an absolute threshold had been crossed, however, they began to consider the relative balance. For this reason, in the early 1930s, British military intelligence engaged in planning based on the expected balance of power with Germany in the late 1930s rather than at the time such planning began. This decision was reinforced by the estimate in British military circles that Germany itself would not be prepared for war in absolute terms until 1938 at the earliest. Thus, although British military leaders expected German rearmament to lead Germany to surpass British power by the mid- to late 1930s, they did not consider a preventive war because they believed Great Britain would not have the capacity for war until the late 1930s at the earliest.

This last finding suggests important questions for future research. From a comparative perspective, is this conception of preparedness for war in an absolute rather than relative sense unique to Britain in the

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67 Indeed correspondence between Eden and Baldwin suggests that public opinion was not seen as an insuperable obstacle to strategic necessities. Eden wrote to Baldwin in February 1934 of possible outcomes at the disarmament conference: "They may not be strong for our public opinion, but must not we lead and educate them to face realities, if they are as stark as they seem?" Eden to Baldwin, February 23, 1934, Papers of Stanley Baldwin, Cambridge University Library, Cambridge, UK, 122, 35–37.
1930s, or is it replicated in other cases? If so, how common are these calculations, and under what conditions are they most likely to occur? These questions have important implications for theories of preventive war and for other realist theories of war, which assume that political leaders largely base decisions for war and peace on calculations of relative power. Evidence to the contrary would require us to rethink many of our theories.