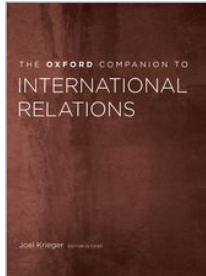


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Preemptive and Preventive War

The concepts of preemptive and preventive war have a long history in the theory and practice of international relations. Military and political leaders from Frederick the Great to George W. Bush have explicitly invoked the concept, and historians have traced a significant number of wars to the preventive motivation. Theoretically, preemption against an anticipated attack is central to spiral models of international conflict, to offense-defense theory, and to theories of crisis instability. A strategy of preventive war to degrade the capabilities of a rising adversary is a common theme in realist balance-of-power theories and hegemonic-transition theories, and in the “bargaining model of war,” in which the inability of rational unitary actors to commit to honor agreements under conditions of shifting power is a key path to war (Fearon, 1995). Just-war theorists and legal scholars have long debated the ethical and legal status of these different forms of anticipatory self-defense.

Scholarly interest in preemptive and preventive war increased significantly after the George W. Bush Administration emphasized “preemption” in its 2002 National Security Strategy and in its rationalization for the 2003 Iraq War. In addition, growing concern about Iran's nuclear program led to intense speculation in 2011–12 as to whether Israel, or possibly even the United States, would respond with a preventive military strike against Iran. Interest in preemption has declined since the end of the Cold War and of fears of a US-Soviet confrontation. That is likely to change, however, with the likely proliferation of nuclear weapons to states that, unlike the United States and the Soviet Union, do not have physically secure nuclear retaliatory forces and reliable command and control systems, and perhaps even stable political systems as well. As a consequence, crisis instability driven by possible incentives for preemption might be a much greater risk in the future than in the past.

This essay begins by defining preemption and prevention. It then turns to an analysis of preemption, to further refinements of the more ambiguous concept of preventive war, and to a consideration of the ethics and legality of preemption and prevention. The essay ends with a discussion of some puzzles in the study of preemption and prevention. Readers interested

in the conditions under which states are most likely to adopt preventive war strategies can consult Van Evera (1999), Copeland (2000), and Ripsman and Levy (2007).

The Distinction between Preemption and Prevention.

Despite considerable scholarly attention to the concepts of preemption and prevention (Van Evera, 1999; Mueller, et al., 2006; Silverstone, 2007; Levy, 2008), there remains considerable confusion about what these concepts mean and how they differ, as evidenced by the frequency with which scholars continue to describe US behavior in the 2003 Iraq War as preemptive rather than preventive. Preemption and prevention have much in common. Both are state strategies involving the use of military force in response to external military threats, and both are driven by “better-now-than-later” logic. These two strategies differ in significant ways, however, including the nature and timing of the threat to which they respond, their respective motivations, their historical frequency, the conditions under which they are likely to be adopted, and their ethical and legal status (Levy, 2008).

Preemption is a response to the anticipation of an imminent attack by the adversary, motivated by the aim of securing the military advantages of striking first. In contrast, a preventive war strategy is a response to perceptions of a rising adversary, the expectation of a decline in relative power, and the fear of its consequences. It aims to forestall the adverse shift in power by defeating the adversary or degrading its military capabilities while the opportunity is still available rather than risk the expected consequences of continued decline. Those consequences include escalating demands by an increasingly powerful adversary, a decline in one's bargaining leverage, and the risk of war under worse circumstances later when the adversary is stronger. The most commonly mentioned example of a preemptive strike is the Israeli initiation of the 1967 War. The clearest examples of a preventive strike are the Israeli military strikes against the Iraqi nuclear reactor in 1981 and against a suspected Syrian nuclear facility in 2007.

Historically, prevention is much more common than preemption. In an influential empirical study Reiter (1995) concludes that “preemptive wars almost never happen.” Wars driven by preventive logic are much more common. Schroeder (1972, p. 322) argues that “preventive wars, even risky preventive wars, are not extreme anomalies in politics. . . . They are a normal, even common, tool of statecraft. . . .” Taylor (1954, p. 166) probably goes too far in claiming that “every war between Great Powers [in the 1848–1918 period] started as a preventive war, not a war of conquest,” but scholars have attributed preventive motivations to Austria-Hungary and Germany in 1914, Germany in 1941, and Japan in 1941. Many argue that an earlier example of a preventive war was the Peloponnesian War (431 BCE), which Thucydides attributed to Sparta's fear of the rising power of Athens.

These conceptual differences between preemption and prevention make it clear that the logic driving US decision making leading up to the Iraq War was not preemptive, because US leaders did not expect an imminent Iraqi attack on the United States or its allies. Preventive logic, driven by the aim of destroying the presumed Iraqi nuclear weapons program, may have played some role, possibly in the decision for war and almost certainly in the administration's efforts to sell the war to the American people and to Congress. With respect to the latter, there is ample evidence to suggest that fear of Iraqi nuclear weapons was one of the primary concerns leading to public support for the war and also to support within the Congress for the October 2002 Congressional resolution to authorize the president to use force against Iraq (Silverstone, 2007; Levy, 2008; Lake, 2010–2011). The jury is still out on the causal weight of the fears of Iraqi weapons of mass destruction on the administration's decision for war, but there is reason to believe that some decision-makers shared the preventive reasoning articulated by former undersecretary of defense Douglas Feith (2008, p. 355):

President Bush faced a difficult timing calculation. . . . Saddam could be expected to get stronger over time, more assertive in his region, and more capable with weapons of mass destruction. If he should someday force a confrontation (by attacking Kuwait, for example), did it make [sic] sense for the United States to postpone that fight? How would President Bush justify having allowed Saddam to acquire substantial nuclear or biological weapons, instead of ending the Iraqi threat before the WMD problem matured?”

Preemption.

The primary criteria for classifying a military action as preemptive are the perceptions and motivations of the preemptor. If political leaders believe there is an unacceptably high probability that the adversary will attack in the short term (usually a few days or weeks), and if they strike first to gain first-mover advantages, or at least to deny those advantages to the adversary, then they are acting preemptively. The accuracy of the preemptor's beliefs is irrelevant to the question of preemption (though it is relevant to the task of providing a causal explanation for the war). Whether Egypt actually planned to attack Israel in 1967, for example, does not bear on the question of whether Israel's first strike was preemptive. On the other hand, if political leaders claim that the adversary was about to strike in order to justify military action that they sought for other reasons, but if they do not in fact anticipate an adversary attack, then their military action cannot be described as preemptive.

Although preemption is a response to an anticipated attack, beliefs that the adversary is about to attack do not always lead to a preemptive response. Israeli leaders had limited warning of an Egyptian and Syrian attack in 1973, but they made a calculated decision not to follow their 1967 strategy of responding preemptively. By waiting for Arab states to initiate the war, they aimed to insure that their Arab adversaries were held responsible for the war, which would significantly increase the likelihood that Israel would be able to secure external diplomatic support and especially military armaments from the United States. Most theories of offense and defense theory (Van Evera, 1999; Brown and Coté, 2004) define offensive advantages too narrowly in terms of first-mover advantages on the battlefield and ignore important diplomatic and political variables.

Preemption plays a central role in spiral models of conflict. The spiral model demonstrates that two adversaries, each driven by primarily or exclusively defensive security aims, may nevertheless be driven by security-dilemma dynamics and get caught up in an escalating conflict spiral. If one side perceives, accurately or otherwise, that the adversary might strike first, it may have an incentive to attack preemptively. Thus, preemption is a key path (though not necessarily the only path) through which conflict spirals might lead to war. For those who feared a US-Soviet war during the Cold War, preemption was a key concern. As Jervis (1989, p. 136) notes, "A wide variety of issues and chains of events could lead to all-out nuclear war, but the last step in almost all of them would be preemption."

Given the theoretical incentives for preemption under certain conditions, it is surprisingly difficult to identify many wars in history in which one side initiated a preemptive strike in response to the expectation that the other side was about to attack. Reiter (1995), looking at the period since the Congress of Vienna in 1815, finds only three cases: German preemption in World War I; Israeli preemption in the 1967 Arab-Israeli War; and Chinese preemption in the Korean War in 1950. Even this list may be too large. The consensus among historians is that Germany wanted a war in 1914 (which is not necessarily to say that other states did not want a war, which is an ongoing debate) and that the German invasion of France through Belgium was not driven primarily by the fear that Russia was about to attack (Fischer, 1967; Mombauer, 2002).

Further Refinements of the Preventive War Concept.

Whereas the concept of preemption is fairly straightforward, that of a preventive war is not, and further conceptual clarification would be useful. One key issue is how broadly or narrowly to define the threat against which a preventive war strategy is directed. Renshon (2006, chap. 1) defines prevention as "action . . . to forestall a grave national security threat," which can include the loss of status or prestige as well as a decline in relative power. Schroeder (2011) defines the threat to include an anticipated breakdown in international order, in which case the goal of preventive war would be not to retard an adversary's military power but instead to "rescue, restore and stabilize the threatened international order." I believe that these broader definitions include too many things under the conceptual umbrella of preventive war. I define preventive war

more narrowly as a military response to the anticipation of an adverse shift in relative military power. (I emphasize military response to differentiate preventive war from alliance formation, arms build-ups, covert action, and other possible responses to decline.) This definition captures a theoretically important and historically identifiable causal pattern. I am not suggesting that other forms of threat or decline are perceived to be less important or less common than perceived declines in relative military power, only that they are analytically distinct and that it is theoretically useful to segregate them for the purposes of theory building.

Although it is common to speak of preventive war as a kind of war, that confounds cause and effect in a single concept (Levy, 2008, p. 3). Most wars have multiple causes. How much causal weight would the preventive motivation have to carry before we could classify the resulting war a preventive war? It makes more sense to refer to the preventive motivation or to preventive logic as a causal variable or mechanism, and then to evaluate the relative causal impact of the preventive motivation compared to that of other variables. One can also speak of preventive war as a state strategy, as I often do in this essay.

It is also erroneous to suggest that states pursuing preventive-war strategies always want to strike first. Although preventers, unlike preemptors, want war, they sometimes have diplomatic and/or domestic political incentives to provoke the adversary into initiating war and thus incur the blame for starting the war. Those German military and political leaders who wanted a preventive war in 1914 to block the rising power of Russia insisted that Germany wait for Russia to mobilize first, in the hope of gaining the political support of the Social Democrats at home and the neutrality of Britain abroad (Levy, 1990–1991).

Although preventive-war strategies are often associated with power transitions, states sometimes adopt preventive-war strategies in response to more limited power shifts, with the aim of degrading the adversary's military capabilities and stopping a further decline of its own bargaining leverage. This is most likely to happen if the state in relative decline anticipates that the adversary is about to cross an important threshold of military power. Fears that the adversary was about to develop a nuclear capability were the dominant motivations for the Israeli military strike against Iraq in 1981 and against Syria in 2007.

Ethical and Legal Considerations.

Although the George W. Bush Administration's attempt to justify and sell the Iraq War as preemptive rather than as preventive may reflect the inherent confusion regarding the meaning of the two concepts, it is more likely that their rhetoric was driven by the recognition that preemption is regarded as more legitimate than prevention in customary international law, in the UN Charter, and in theories of just war. Most contemporary theories of anticipatory self-defense begin with US Secretary of State Daniel Webster's reasoning in the 1837 *Caroline* case, which emphasized the criteria of necessity, imminence, and proportionality. Webster argued that the use of force in self-defense is justified only if the “necessity of self-defence is instant, overwhelming, and leaving no choice of means, and no moment for deliberation,” and if force is not “unreasonable or excessive” (cited in Doyle, 2008).

Although these criteria point to the greater legitimacy of preemption than of prevention as means of self-defense, some scholars and public intellectuals have begun to question the utility of these criteria in the context of nuclear weapons, global terrorism, and nonstate actors that may be difficult to deter. The problem is particularly acute in the case of potential threats from nonstate actors. If a terrorist group has nuclear weapons but no territory to serve as a hostage, how can a prospective target threaten to inflict unacceptable damage after suffering a nuclear attack as a means of deterring such an attack in the first place? Most theorists of anticipatory self-defense use the moral and legal constraints on preventive war as a point of departure but attempt to construct a more nuanced and usable set of criteria for dealing with new weapons and new political units in an evolving threat environment (Kaufman, 2005; Dershowitz, 2007; Shue and Rodin, 2007; Doyle, 2008).

Doyle (2008), for example, accepts current international legal criteria that legitimate preemptive responses to imminent threats and develops a new set of criteria for preventive responses to future threats. Doyle's key criteria are *lethality*, defined in terms of the extent and irreversibility of the anticipated harm; the *likelihood* that the adversary will implement the threat; the *legitimacy* of a military response based on traditional just-war criteria of proportionality, necessity, and deliberation (which includes the requirement of many diverse voices in the decision); and the *legality* of the behavior of both the adversary and the preventer. Any state contemplating preventive action must attempt to secure multilateral authorization through the Security Council, though if that fails after a good-faith effort, Doyle allows for unilateral preventive action.

Some Concluding Puzzles.

The growing literature on preemption and prevention has done much to advance our understanding of the role of these behaviors in international conflict, but they have generated a number of puzzles that need to be answered. Here I highlight some of these puzzles and in the process suggest a number of potentially fruitful avenues for future research. I will focus on puzzles of prevention but begin with one regarding preemption. There is a striking gap, as we have seen, between predictions that preemptive strikes should be commonplace, based on theoretically plausible incentives to strike first, and the apparent absence of too many traces of preemption in the historical record. Explaining this puzzle is an important task for future research. Part of the answer is almost certainly the fact that incentives to strike first incorporate diplomatic, domestic, and perhaps psychological variables as well as strictly military ones.

With respect to preventive war, one question that has yet to attract much attention concerns the kinds of power shifts that are most likely to lead to preventive-war strategies. Scholars speak in very general terms about one state's concern about the rising power of another, but they give little attention to which kinds of adverse power shifts states find most threatening and to which they are most likely to respond with a strategy of preventive war. Analyses of preventive war are generally based on undifferentiated conceptions of power. Although it may be true that states in relative decline conceive of decline in terms of some conception of aggregate power, it is also possible that they adopt preventive-war strategies in response to particular kinds of power shifts. Often it is primarily military dimensions of power. Israel's preventive strikes against Iraq in 1981 and against Syria in 2007 were driven exclusively by fears of the adversary's development of a nuclear weapons capability. Germany's greatest fear in 1914 was the growing strength of the Russian army in the context of the likelihood of a two-front war in Europe (Fischer, 1967). In contrast, Japan's concerns in 1941 were its shortages of resources and its inability to keep up with growing US economic power (Copeland, 2011). Hitler's fears of the consequences of adverse demographic trends as well as growing Soviet economic trends were an important motivation for his invasion of the Soviet Union in 1941 (Copeland, 2000) and perhaps also affected the timing of his war in the West (Steiner, 2011). Different dimensions of military power may also be important. In the mid-1930s, French leaders were most fearful of rapid increases in German army strength, whereas British leaders were most concerned about the growth in German air power (Ripsman and Levy, 2007). The study of preventive war needs to shift from a focus on aggregate power to a focus on the dimensions of power.

Another limitation of analyses of preventive war, especially quantitative studies, is that they are too narrowly focused on gradual shifts in power. They have not explored the potentially distinctive dynamics of step-level shifts in relative military power that result from technological breakthroughs, arms sales, or other threshold effects. Scholars have recently begun to address preventive responses to the anticipated development of nuclear weapons capabilities, but it is also worth exploring step-level power shifts by nonnuclear states to see if they generate different kinds of strategic responses. Historical examples include the Russian completion of the trans-Siberian railway in 1904 (Nish, 1986), the Russian completion of its army reforms and railroad modernization by 1917, and the Czech arms sales to Egypt in 1955 (Levy and Gochal, 2001–2012), each of which generated a preventive response.

Still another gap in the literature on preventive war is its almost exclusive focus on the behavior of the target and the neglect of both the behavior of their rising adversaries and the strategic interaction between them. Do rising states fear being the target of a preventive war? Do they consider preempting the preventer? Or do they adopt a strategy of appeasement and attempt to buy time until the ongoing power shift leaves them in a stronger position? Scholars have addressed these questions in particular instances of aspiring nuclear powers in the contemporary era, but much could be learned from a study of earlier historical cases. If, as many argue, German leaders perceived a strong incentive to move preventively against Russia in 1914, did Russian leaders recognize this? If one side wants a war sooner rather than later, shouldn't the other want one later rather than sooner? Why did the tsar take a hard line against Germany rather than pursue a conciliatory policy until the Russian war machine was ready and Germany could no longer match the combined strength of Russia and France? Did domestic calculations overwhelm strategic assessments?

Further research into these and other aspects of preemptive and preventive war would do much to enhance our understanding of these age-old phenomena that continue to have enormous relevance for contemporary international security.

[*See also* BUSH DOCTRINE; FORCE, USE OF; INTERNATIONAL RELATIONS; IRAQ, US INVASION OF; *and* WAR.]

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