

Scott Silverstone argues that political leaders often incorporate estimates of the consequences of war for the postwar international order into their calculations about whether or not to initiate a preventive war. Responding to the common argument that Britain and France would have been better off initiating a preventive war against Germany in 1936 rather than waiting to fight three years later after a vigorous German rearmament program, Silverstone argues that an important but overlooked reason for British leaders' rejection of the military option in 1936 was their fear that military action would not solve the security problems facing Britain and that it would contribute to an unstable and illegitimate postwar political order.

Dale Copeland examines the Japanese decision for war against the United States in 1941. He argues that the anticipation of economic and military decline and future insecurity, fueled by depression-induced restrictive trade policies that would cut off Japan from badly needed resources, led Japanese decision makers to a desperate preventive war driven by better-now-than-later and lesser-of-two-evils logic.

Preventive War: Concept and Propositions

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Preventive war is a state strategy to use military force to forestall an adverse shift in the distribution of power between two states. It is driven by the perception of a rising adversary, the anticipation of a decline in relative power, and the fear of the consequences of decline, which include diminishing bargaining leverage, the likelihood of escalating demands by an increasingly powerful adversary, and the risk of war under worse circumstances later. The logic of prevention is “better now than later”—it is better to fight now and degrade the adversary's capabilities while the opportunity is still available, than to risk the consequences of continued decline. Specific conflicts of interest at stake are secondary in the preventive path to war. The primary issue is power.

Historians' accounts reveal the role of preventive logic in many decisions for war, and that logic is central in several realist theories of international conflict, including balance of power theory (Morgenthau 1948), hegemonic transition theory (Gilpin 1981), and dynamic differentials theory (Copeland 2000). The theoretical importance of preventive war has been reinforced by the formalization of the “commitment problem,” which emphasizes the impediments to conflict resolution under conditions of shifting power as one of only two or three paths to war for unitary rational

actors (Fearon 1995; Powell 2006). My aim here is to build on my earlier work (Levy 1987, 2008), provide a conceptual introduction for the historically-based commentaries on preventive war in this issue, and suggest promising directions for future research.

CONCEPTUAL ISSUES

Preventive war is one of many strategies based on better-now-than-later logic, and it would be useful to differentiate among them. First, prevention differs from preemption, which is a response to the anticipation of an imminent attack and which is motivated by the goal of securing first-mover advantages rather than of forestalling a negative shift in relative power. Preemptors do not want war but feel that they have no choice, while preventers want war in the short term to avoid the risk of war under less favorable conditions in the long term. Preventers do not necessarily want to initiate war, however, and they sometimes prefer to provoke war in an attempt to shift the blame to their adversary and secure the diplomatic and domestic political benefits of doing so. In 1914, for example, German leaders wanted war to block the rising power of Russia but insisted on letting Russia mobilize first (Fischer 1967).

An anticipated shift in relative power can trigger a preventive military response even if it does not involve a complete power transition. Even limited power shifts can result in an erosion of the stronger state's bargaining leverage, pose a threat to its interests, and trigger military action, either in the form of a limited preventive strike or a preventive war. Limited power shifts are most likely to trigger a preventive response if they cross an important threshold of military power, the clearest example of which is the nuclear threshold. Examples include Israeli strikes against the Iraqi nuclear reactor in 1981 (Feldman 1982) and against a Syrian facility in 2007 (Follath and Stark 2009), U.S. debates about the wisdom of a preventive strike against North Korean nuclear facilities in 1994, and ongoing debates among Israeli leaders about how best to respond to Iran's likely development of a nuclear capability. U.S. political leaders used popular fears of an Iraqi nuclear capability as the primary rationales for wars against Iraq in 1991 and especially in 2003 (Levy 2008).¹

Although most of the literature on preventive war focuses on the dyadic relationship between the rising and declining state, third parties can play an

¹Expectations that the adversary will cross a non-nuclear threshold can also trigger a preventive response. Japan's concerns about a step-level increase in Russian power projection in East Asia after its completion of the trans-Siberian railroad contributed to Japan's decision for war against Russia in 1904 (Nish 1985). A limited preventive strike can escalate to all-out war if the target responds with force, the anticipation of which presumably contributes to the initiator's decision on prevention.

important role. First, the rising power may pose a greater immediate threat to a state's allies than to the state itself, as illustrated by U.S. concerns about Iraq's development of a nuclear weapons capacity in 1990 and again in 2003. Second, the source of the threat might not be a single adversary but instead a combination of other states. German military leaders in 1914 were confident that they could win a bilateral war against a rising Russia for years to come, but they feared that by 1917 they might not be able to win a two-front war against the Franco-Russian alliance.

I treat preventive war as a state strategy rather than as a kind of war. The concept of *a* preventive war, though widely used, raises analytic problems (Levy 2008:3). It confounds cause and effect in a single concept and complicates the task of explaining outcomes, most of which have multiple causes. It raises the question of how important the preventive motivation has to be before we could call the resulting war a preventive war. The preventive war label would be warranted if the preventive motivation is a sufficient condition for war, but I can think of no empirical case that qualifies. The preventive motivation may be a necessary condition for a particular war, but the preventive war label would be misleading if there are other necessary conditions for that outcome, as illustrated by Israel's initiation of the 1956 Sinai War (Levy and Gochal 1956). It is better to refer to the preventive motivation for war or to preventive logic as a causal variable or mechanism, or to a preventive war strategy, rather than to preventive war as a type of war. But the concept of preventive war is entrenched in the literature, and it does facilitate an economy of language. When I use the concept of preventive war I mean either a state strategy or a war for which the primary cause is the preventive motivation.

I define preventive war fairly narrowly in terms of a military response to an adverse shift in relative military power.² Some define preventive war more broadly. Renshon (2006:chap. 1), for example, defines prevention as "an action . . . fought 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 (this issue) accepts the definition of preventive war as military action driven by better-now-than-later logic to forestall an intolerable future threat, but broadens the definition to include another source of future threat—an anticipated breakdown in international order. In such cases, Schroeder argues, the main goal of preventive action is not to destroy or reduce an adversary's military power but to "rescue, restore and stabilize the threatened international order." Political and legal theorists working on "anticipatory self-defense" also adopt a broader definition of preventive action (Doyle 2008:55–56). These broader definitions, I argue, include

²States can adopt alternative strategies to forestall a decline in relative power, including covert action, building up armaments, securing allies, other forms of containment, and economic revitalization. The aim is the same, but preventive war refers only to forceful military responses to military threats.

too many things under the same conceptual umbrella and impede a more discriminating assessment of causation.

HYPOTHESES ON PREVENTIVE WAR

States do not always respond to the anticipation of a negative power shift with a strategy of preventive war, as illustrated by the power transition between Britain and the United States at the end of the nineteenth century and by the absence of an American military response to block the Soviet Union and then China from developing a nuclear capability during the Cold War. The critical question is the conditions under which a state in relative decline is most likely to adopt a strategy of preventive war, or when the preventive motivation for war is the strongest. The literature is characterized more by a set of bilateral hypotheses than by a well-developed theory (Ripsman and Levy 2007; Van Evera 1999), though Copeland (2000) develops a more fully integrated theory. I begin with the costs, risks, and benefits of delay, because it is the fear of the future that drives preventive logic. I then turn to the costs and risks of a preventive war now.

Anything that increases the future military threat posed by the rising adversary increases the incentives for a state in relative decline to adopt a preventive war strategy. The logic is that the greater the adversary's future advantage, the greater is its likely margin of victory in a future war and its future bargaining leverage, and the greater the concessions the declining state would have to make to avoid such a war. Thus the greater the magnitude of the anticipated power shift, the greater the incentives for war now, and complete power transitions are more war-prone than are more limited power shifts. In addition, expectations of a permanent power shift are more likely to trigger a preventive response than are expectations that the shift will be temporary.³ The speed of the power shift might also be important. In the context of uncertainty about the extent of rising state's future advantage, leaders of the declining state use the speed of the power shift as a proxy for both the likelihood of a power transition and the adversary's ultimate margin of advantage. A rapid power shift also shortens the time the declining state has to increase its own power, gain allies, or seek an accommodation with its rival, which narrows the range of alternative strategies and increases the likelihood of a military response.

The shift in relative power within a dyad takes place within a system-level context, and the distribution of power in the international system can influence decisions for preventive war. A shift in power between two states

³Britain's anticipation in the mid-1930s that the power shift in Germany's favor would be temporary rather than permanent was the critical factor contributing to the British strategy of appeasement against Germany (Ripsman and Levy 2007).

in a bipolar system is more likely to lead to a strategy of prevention than is a comparable shift in a multipolar system, for two reasons. A declining state in a multipolar system is more likely than one in a bipolar system to find allies to deter a future conflict with a then-stronger adversary. In addition, a state taking preventive action against a rising adversary risks weakening itself as well as its adversary. This increases its vulnerability to another power, which is more serious for a leading power in a multipolar system than in a bipolar system, where there is a greater gap between the two leading states and others (Copeland 2000).

Although preventive war strategies are driven primarily by an anticipated shift in power, they are also influenced by expectations of the adversary's future intentions. The probability of a preventive response to an anticipation of an adverse power shift increases with the expectation that the adversary will try to exploit its stronger position by going to war or using the threat of war to extract significant concessions, whether because of an ongoing rivalry, an unresolved territorial dispute (Vasquez 2009), or other domestic or international pressures. On the other hand, the incentives for prevention are reduced if the declining state has alternative strategies to provide for its future security, including securing allies against the rising power, building up armaments or securing armaments from others, or economic revitalization that increases a state's future military potential. Israeli leaders' incentives for a preventive military response to the 1955 Czech arms sales to Egypt were enhanced by their belief that a "second round" of war was inevitable and by their failure to secure arms from France or the United States (Levy and Gochal 2001–2002).

The costs and risks of inaction in response to a rising adversary can be quite substantial, but so can the costs and risks of a preventive war strategy. As Bismarck said, "preventive war is like suicide for fear of death." The greater the expected probability of winning a war now, and the lower the anticipated costs, the greater is the strength of the preventive motivation for war.⁴ The probability of winning is shaped by the behavior of third states as well as by the dyadic distribution of power, so that expectations of the behavior and military effectiveness of potential allies and adversaries may be a critical factor influencing the strength of the preventive motivation for war.

In decisions for a preventive strike against an adversary that threatens to cross a critical threshold of military power, key variables are the probability and costs of an adversary response, the likelihood that a limited strike will effectively degrade the adversary's capabilities and prevent the step-level increase in power, and the time before the adversary could rebuild its military capabilities. If the adversary has the capacity to rebuild within a

⁴This is why weaker states rarely adopt preventive war strategies against stronger adversaries whose advantage is increasing. An important exception is Japan in 1941, as Copeland argues in his commentary.

few years, the benefits of a preventive strike may be too temporary to be worth the risk. Preventive strikes may also have reputational effects, though when they deter other potential challengers and when they create incentives for other states to build up their arms is a question that has yet to be investigated.

The costs and risks of preventive war go beyond calculations of likely battlefield outcomes. Schroeder (this issue) and Silverstone (this issue) each emphasizes the consequences of preventive wars for the normative international order that underpins the security of states. In addition, concerns about the domestic legitimacy of a preventive war strategy sometimes constrain states, especially democratic states (Schweller 1992). Silverstone (2010) argues that an important factor contributing the British and French decisions not to initiate a preventive war against Germany in the 1936 Rhineland Crisis was their fear that a preventive war, even if successful, would both undermine the domestic legitimacy of (and unity behind) the war effort and contribute to an unstable and illegitimate postwar political order. This is an important line of argument that requires further empirical validation—both in the 1936 case and in other decisions on whether or not to adopt a preventive war strategy.

Domestic politics influence decisions for preventive war in other ways. Internal social, political, and economic changes may be a major source of the relative decline in military power and potential that creates the incentives for preventive war. Regime type may also be important. Although the argument that democracies never fight preventive wars, especially against states of comparable strength (Schweller 1992), is too strong (Levy 2008), the probabilistic hypothesis that democracies are more constrained in adopting preventive war strategies than are other states is certainly plausible and worthy of empirical test. Democratic political cultures may be opposed to preventive military action because they believe that it is morally unacceptable or contrary to the identity of democratic peoples. Thus Brodie (1959:237–239) argued that “war is generally unpopular [with the American people] and the public mood inclines to support really bold action only in response to great anger or great fright. The fright must be something more than a sudden new rise in [the adversary’s] capability.” The U.S. experience suggests, however, that cultural attitudes toward preventive war vary over time (Silverstone 2007).

In addition, democratic leaders’ electoral accountability may induce shorter time horizons, leading them to discount the long-term costs of inaction in response to a rising adversary. Political leaders must bear any political costs of a war fought now—and there is strong evidence that democratic leaders are more likely than their authoritarian counterparts to be deposed after a losing war effort—whereas they can pass on the costs of delay to their successors. Brodie (1973:26) argues that the “willingness to gamble *now* at

unlimited stakes for what is a highly speculative long-term gain” is “normally most uncharacteristic of politicians.”

Brodie’s comment raises several issues relating to risk, uncertainty, and time horizons. Preventive war, like any war, is a gamble. But so is inaction in the face of relative decline, given uncertainties as to whether, and how far, one’s power position will continue to decline, the adversary’s future intentions, one’s ability to secure diplomatic support or to appease the adversary successfully, and the likelihood and outcome of a future war. In addition, preventive war and continued decline each involve additional domestic uncertainties. How leaders will balance these uncertainties is often dependent on their individual world views, personalities, and risk propensities (Renshon 2006), which are difficult to measure, even in a single historical case.

Still, research in social psychology and behavioral economics reveals interesting patterns of behavior that might shape decisions under conditions of relative decline. There is evidence that individuals tend to be risk acceptant in the domain of losses and that political leaders tend to take excessive risks to maintain their current positions (Levy 2000), and that political leaders in international crises often conclude that all of their options are bad ones. This implies that preventive war strategies under conditions of decline might be more appealing than Brodie suggests. In addition, evidence suggesting that people discount future gains more than they do future losses (Streich and Levy 2007) increases the relative weight of future losses from continued decline and thus increases incentives for preventive war. A good example of a risk acceptant decision for war driven by expectations of declining power, a bleak future, and diminishing opportunities is Japan’s attack against the United States in 1941 (Copeland, this issue; Taliaferro 2004).

CONCLUSION

Historians have illuminated the role of preventive logic in decisions for many wars for nearly three millennia, and recent research by political scientists has advanced our theoretical understanding of the phenomenon of preventive war. But much remains to be done. Here I highlight some of the many potentially fruitful avenues for future research.

One unexplored question is the kinds of power shifts that induce the greatest fear and that are most likely to lead to preventive war strategies. Are states in relative decline most concerned about increases in the adversary’s current relative military capabilities or economic strength, or about technological breakthroughs or demographic shifts? Although scholars speak in very general terms about power shifts, and although formal models of the process (Powell 2006) are based on undifferentiated conceptions of power,

there is reason to believe that a unidimensional conception of power cannot capture the complexity of the link between power shifts and war. Germany in 1914 was most worried about Russian military forces in being by 1917, whereas Japan in 1941 was most troubled by its shortages of resources and its inability to keep up with American economic power. In the mid-1930s, France most feared rapid increases in German army strength, whereas Britain was consumed by the German air threat. States sometimes face increasing threats on multiple dimensions of power simultaneously. In 1904 Japan feared the rising power of Russia along three dimensions: the completion of the trans-Siberian railroad, the significant expansion of its Far Eastern fleet, and the ongoing fortification of Port Arthur (Nish 1985).

The hypothesis that preventive war strategies can be triggered by shifts in different dimensions of military power suggests that we need more empirical research on the question of what kinds of power shifts are most likely to trigger preventive war strategies by what kinds of states and under what conditions. It also suggests that statistical studies of power shifts and war (Lemke 2003) should use multiple indicators of power (for example, the Correlates of War Project's distinct military, economic, and demographic indicators of national capabilities) rather than a single aggregate index.

Preventive war strategies are triggered not only by gradual shifts in power—which are well-captured by measures of the size of armies, navies, economies, or populations—but also by step-level increases in military strength resulting from arms sales, technological breakthroughs (nuclear and otherwise), or other less measurable elements of military power. Historical examples of anticipated step-level shifts in power that generated a preventive motivation for war include the Russian completion of the trans-Siberian railway in 1904, the Russian completion of its army reforms and railroad modernization by 1917, the Czech arms sales to Egypt in 1955, and the Iraqi nuclear program. None of these historical processes that arguably triggered preventive war strategies is adequately captured by the Correlates of War indicators, though arms sales are certainly measurable. This suggests the limitations of a statistical analysis of the link between power shifts and war that does not incorporate indicators of step-level changes in relative military capabilities.

Another useful direction for future research concerns bargaining and strategic interaction. Most historical case studies of preventive war focus on the preventer and neglect the perceptions and strategies of their rising adversaries. Do they fear being the target of a preventive war or strike?⁵ Do they consider preempting the preventer? Do they attempt to appease their adversary, adopting a strategy of “buying time” until the ongoing shift in power puts them in a stronger position? Analysts pay some attention

⁵German leaders prior to World War I feared a repeat of Britain's “Copenhagening” of the Danish fleet in 1807.

to these questions for aspiring nuclear powers in the contemporary era, but the question applies equally well to more distant historical cases. If German leaders perceived a strong preventive motivation for war in 1914, why did Russian leaders adopt a confrontational stance toward Germany rather than buy time until the Russian war machine was ready and Germany was vulnerable? Did one side or the other misperceive the changing power relationship? Did they focus on different components of military power? Or were strategic assessments dominated by domestic political calculations? These and other questions provide fertile ground for future research in the theory and practice of preventive war.

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Preventive Wars to Restore and Stabilize the International System

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This essay draws on history for reflections on the causes, purposes and effects of preventive wars, treating international politics, as historians usually do, as purposive conduct rather than behavior and emphasizing motives, assumptions, strategies, goals, and individual and collective mindsets.

I accept Jack Levy's definition of preventive war, especially the strategic logic ("better now than later") and the reliance on military action to meet a threat considered sure to become intolerable and unmanageable later. The definition seems to assume, however, that preventive wars arise only from such perceived military-strategic threats and aim to meet them essentially by defeating the adversary and restoring a desired distribution of power. I will argue that some preventive wars have been launched primarily because states perceive the main source of their insecurity less in direct military threat than in a breakdown in international order leading to intolerable uncertainty and lawlessness in the international system, and primarily aim by preventive war not to destroy their opponent's military power but to restore and stabilize the threatened international order.