The preventive use of force entails the discretionary, anticipatory use of armed force to foil the emergence or development of a prospective threat. It can encompass everything from a single missile strike on a high value target to the launching of a large-scale conventional war. It is inherently contradictory: an offensive action intended to have a defensive effect against a threat that has not yet developed. As such, it does not benefit from the efficient inaction of deterrence, since it requires actual engagement and not just the threat of retaliation. It does not have the legitimacy of defense, unlike preemptive war, since it is offensive in the absence of an imminent threat. It presumably has the efficiency advantage, however, of removing the possibility of an anticipated threat entirely, cauterizing it, thus stopping a potentially costly pathway of extended conflict.

To this point, Kenneth Waltz (1959) wrote in *Man, The State, and War* that “though a state may want to remain at peace, it may have to consider undertaking the preventive use of force; for if it does not strike when the moment is favorable, it may be struck later when the advantage has shifted to the other side.” (7) Elihu Root (1916)
similarly cautioned that a state should resort to the preventive use of force to avoid a “condition of affairs in which it will be too late to protect itself.” (109-11) It was ostensibly this logic that led the United States into Iraq, led Israel to bomb Osirak, and underpins Israel’s current desire to attack Iran’s nuclear development facilities.

There is an enormous literature on the preventive use of force; the topic has been addressed in theoretical and philosophical considerations of war, peace, and politics for centuries. Writing on the subject spiked, however, after President George W. Bush justified the 2003 US invasion of Iraq in terms of the preventive use of force (though he erroneously referred to it as preemptive war). Most of the literature falls into one of two categories: assessments of the ethics of the preventive use of force and analysis of both precipitating and permissive causes. This paper does not engage the ongoing debates about the ethics, origins, and implications of the preventive use of force, however, except in terms of how they affect and are affected by more practical considerations. Instead, it identifies the costs and benefits of preventive military action and evaluates them relative to alternative responses and non-response. Doing this requires identifying the inherent characteristics of the preventive use of force, the types of threats amenable to such actions, and the conditions under which these threats might be better addressed using preventive force than other responses. Such calculations do not take place in a vacuum, however, and are susceptible to political considerations. Also, because preventive military action is undertaken in response to an anticipated threat, rather than one that has materialized, measuring responses’ relative costs and benefits depends in part on accurate threat assessment. The paper therefore includes a brief discussion of tendencies towards threat exaggeration and cognitive limitations on measuring risk.
By looking at the fundamental features of the preventive use of force and the conditions under which the strategy may be employed, this paper offers a pragmatic perspective on preventive military action thus far absent from the literature. Ultimately, this chapter concludes that the preventive use of force is only rarely and under very specific conditions the *best* option in the face of a perceived emergent threat. It may nonetheless be the *preferred* option in some circumstances. If the benefits appear high (decision makers perceive the incipient threat to be extreme and/or believe there would be a political boost from taking preventive action) and the potential costs – initial expenses, retaliation, and escalation – are low relative to a state’s ability to absorb them, a government may opt for preventive military action. In other words, the threats that could arise must be perceived as severe and predictable enough to justify the costs of precipitant action and/or the government undertaking such action must be wealthy and secure enough that the costs and risks of such action are effectively diminished relative to the perceived benefits.

*Costs and benefits*

The goals of preventive military action are to retain an advantage, to cauterize or defer a developing threat, to jam the mechanism before the tables turn. A state must be willing and able to undertake what is essentially an act of war to prevent a future greater war in which it may not have an advantage. It must be willing to assume the risks of retaliation, escalation, and disapprobation in order to achieve its end. The threat must therefore be perceived to be sufficient and certain enough to justify the preventive action and, moreover, the state must be convinced that the costs it may incur with such action
will still be fewer than the potential costs it would suffer if it failed to use preventive force.

The costs and benefits of the preventive use of force can be measured in two ways. The first is to consider whether the risks of preventive military action are greater than the risks of complete inaction, i.e. whether the inherent costs of undertaking preventive military action are still lower than the expected costs of allowing the anticipated threat to fully materialize. The second is to determine whether preventive force is better not only than inaction, but also better than alternative interim responses to the perceived threat. Such alternatives can include diplomacy, deterrence, or economic means to address the concern in its early stages.

In either cost-benefit analysis, one must begin by assessing the inherent costs and benefits of the preventive use of force. The initial anticipated costs of such action conform to those for any use of force, especially an offensive military action. They include the actual costs of the attack, any domestic political fallout, any international disapprobation, the political and opportunity costs in terms of the relationship with the entity that was targeted, costs to other national interests (economic ties, soft power, and so forth), and the possibility for both retaliation and escalation once hostilities are initiated. These are standard concerns for offensive military action.

The anticipated benefits of preventive attacks are different in several ways from those of other forms of warfare, however. Rather the demonstrable, direct responses to clear and present dangers like conquest, defense of key interests and territories, or defeat of an enemy, the primary benefit of the preventive use of force is ideally the elimination of the possibility of the emergence or development of a threat. There is no victory or
possibility of victory. There is, at best, the elimination or deferral of a threat. This is far harder to measure, prove, and tout as a success than the more concrete outcomes of other forms of warfare. The other potential benefits of the preventive use of force are also amorphous. A show of force could have a deterrent effect on potential enemies, but it could also serve to strengthen their resolve. The Iranian government, having seen the effects of Israel’s attack on the Osirak reactor, did not decide against nuclearization, but instead ensured that their own nuclear development facilities would be far less vulnerable than Iraq’s had been. A government or policymaker might experience a rally-round-the-flag or diversionary (wag-the-dog) domestic political boost with the deployment of military forces for preventive ends, but in the absence of an extent threat, this would be harder to achieve. Finally, the preventive use of force could yield positive international responses, but again, the government or policymakers responsible would have to be able to demonstrate persuasively that a serious threat would have emerged absent their action and, moreover, that their preventive behavior was not more costly to the system than the potential threat might have been. The United States’ difficulties rallying international support for the 2003 invasion of Iraq and the disapprobrium the US subsequently suffered illustrates this challenge. Ultimately, with the preventive use of force, there is no ground gained; there are no foreign forces visibly and dramatically repelled. Preventive force – a military attack into a sovereign territory targeting either a resident non-state actor or the state itself – therefore becomes a far harder case to make to domestic and international audiences, both before and after it is used.

These nebulous benefits, in turn, impose additional unique costs. If the incipient threat is hard to prove, may never have emerged, may be considered a misreading or
misunderstanding of trends, or otherwise can be brought into doubt, the preventive military action becomes politically and ethically unjustifiable as do the costs associated with it. This is true even if the preventive military action is very carefully tailored to be as precise and limited as possible.

Normative proscriptions against the preventive use of force abound, both in the US and abroad. Hans J. Morgenthau (1993) wrote in his seminal work *Politics Among Nations* that attitudes towards war had changed, so that one could not “consider seriously the possibility of preventive war, regardless of its expediency in view of the national interest…” (232) He explained:

…the moral condemnation of war as such has manifested itself in recent times in the Western world. When war comes, it must come as a natural catastrophe or as the evil deed of another nation, not as a foreseen and planned culmination of one’s own foreign policy. Only thus might the moral scruples, rising from the violated moral norm that there ought to be no war at all, be stilled, if they can be stilled at all. (Morgenthau 1993, 232)

Harry S. Truman similarly observed:

It goes without saying that the idea of ‘preventive war’ – in the sense of a military attack not provoked by an attack on us or allies – is generally unacceptable to Americans. A surprise attack upon the Soviet Union, despite the provocations of recent Soviet behavior, would be repugnant to many Americans. Although the American people would probably rally in support of the war effort, the shock of responsibility for a surprise attack would be morally corrosive. (Etzold and Gaddis 1978, 430-432)

And George Kennan and Bernard Brodie cautioned, respectively, that “a democratic society cannot plan a preventive war,” (Schweller 1992, 242-244) and “a policy of preventive war has always been ‘unrealistic’ in the American democracy.’” (243) In light of this, expectations of domestic and international disapprobation in the event that a preventive use of force is undertaken therefore must be included in any cost-benefit analysis of such action. In practical terms, this means that the preventive use of
force is an enormous political risk; the anticipated threat must be great enough to justify it.

The potential costs of preventive military action are high, but it would make rational sense to use such force when two conditions pertain: *the threat a country’s policymakers anticipate is bigger than the risks inherent to preventive action* and *the threat cannot be equally or better mitigated by any other means*. It is important to note at the outset that this calculation will be different for different countries, depending on their circumstances. The strongest countries, which can bear the burden of the costs of the use of force, retaliation, and criticism, have more freedom to resort to preventive military action than those with less ability to absorb such costs. In effect, powerful countries assume less risk with such actions, which, using the first cost-benefit analysis of action vs. inaction, lowers the relative cost of action. However, application of the second cost-benefit analysis, preventive use of force vs. alternative responses, can change that calculation, since lower cost options to both preventive military action and inaction may be available and superior, even for great powers.

**Threats**

Cost-benefit analyses must be undertaken with a goal in mind. In this case, states at a minimum want to ensure their own survival, their freedom, and often their values; they therefore must defend against threats to their sovereignty, sources of power, status, and principles. The extent to which each of these is vulnerable will depend on individual states’ circumstances, with a whole range of variables coming into play: their relative military power, their geographic location, their international relationships (good and bad),
the strength of their economy, their internal political stability and demographics, and so forth.

Taking each essential interest in turn, we can begin with sovereignty. Threats to sovereignty – that is, efforts to reduce a country to an ungoverned territory or a territory under new management – may include efforts to conquer some or all of a state’s territory or to overthrow or destabilize a state’s government and institutions. Russia’s assertion of control over Crimea and threat to Ukrainian territory and other states in eastern Europe is a stark reminder that though conquest has become rare, it has not been eliminated. American troops remain in Afghanistan, where the US and its allies toppled the Taliban, and Iraq is not the same country it was before external powers forced their way into the country and overthrew its government. Taiwan remains concerned about China’s intentions towards it; Sudan and South Sudan are poised at the edge of a fractious and tenuous peace; South Korea and North Korea each continue to fear the other’s possible attempt to unify the peninsula under its own rule; and Israel remains on constant alert for fear of its neighbors attempting to wipe it off the map.

Meanwhile, many states are concerned about defending their sovereignty from within: internal wars, insurgencies, secessionist movements, terrorist activities, and organized crime are threatening the standing governments in countries as varied as Spain, Somalia, Mexico, Thailand, and Syria. In some cases, those who are challenging their states from within would be satisfied with political concessions that would largely leave their governing structures and borders in place; others, however, want nothing short of the overthrow of existing regimes so that they can restructure their countries into entirely new entities.
Nonmilitary threats like pandemics that could annihilate people or devastate the institutions of the state would likewise be considered existential. Because preventive military strikes would make no sense as a response to these problems, we can leave them off the table.4

Lesser challenges to sovereignty involve incursions or attacks on a state’s people or property by external terrorist groups, foreign drone strikes, and any other activities that effectively reduce a country’s territorial integrity and control, though they may not threaten its survival.5

Another essential interest of the state is its power. Power can be measured in myriad ways, but is best understood as the accumulation of those resources and abilities that give the state durability and potential for growth domestically and the ability to defend and assert itself internationally. The conventionally recognized elements of national power are economies, militaries, and political institutions. Threats to a state’s power thus can include weakening or undermining a state’s economy or political institutions or reducing, eliminating, or making obsolete its military capabilities. International sanctions like those in place against Iran, North Korea, and Cuba are one representation of this kind of threat; economic sanctions are intended to have negative effects on a country’s material wellbeing, weaken its political institutions by demonstrating their failures, flaws, and/or corruption and, often, impede its ability to modernize or maintain or develop its military.

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4 The fact that the preventive use of force is seriously considered in light of possible emergent military threats but that intensive preventive action on the same scale to ameliorate nascent but observable threats like global warming and its effects is a topic worthy of a conference of its own.

5 Interestingly, illegal immigration could also be classified this way.
Denial of access to key strategic areas or resources is a more direct attack on a state’s power and independence of action; while sanctions work indirectly, if at all, denying a state’s mobility for either trade or defense purposes, or cutting it off from necessary resources like energy or industrial inputs, is a more direct, immediate threat. These dynamics are in play worldwide. China is in the process of slowly circumscribing American access to Asian waters, building up its own military capabilities specifically to challenge the US navy in the South China Sea. Meanwhile, Iran developed fast attack boats to challenge US vessels in the Strait of Hormuz, should tensions between the two states ever escalate to kinetic conflict. As for cutting off resources, in 2010 China blocked Japanese access to rare earths for some time in retaliation for Japanese interdiction of a Chinese fishing boat; in 2014 Russia removed the price supports it had proffered to Ukraine raising the cost of Russian natural gas in Kiev by 80 percent. The implicit threat, however, was that Russia can turn off the tap altogether. These kinds of actions can seriously circumscribe a state’s power.

Intertwined with threats to states’ power are threats to states’ international status. This is because power is important not just absolutely, but relatively, since states are concerned about economic and military competition. Efforts to reduce states’ status can include ejecting them from international organizations or alliances, reducing trade ties, removing or refusing them diplomatic recognition, or otherwise shoving them to the sidelines of international interactions. The 2014 decision to expel Russia from the G-8, for example, was an attack on Russia’s status. India and the US, and the US and Venezuela, each undertook tit-for-tat expulsions of each other’s diplomats in the spring of the same year.
The aforementioned threats to status are symbolic, but threats to status can also be more concrete as competing powers arise in the military, economic, diplomatic, or socio-cultural realms. In fact, Douglas Lemke (2003, 274) characterized most scholarship on preventive war as focusing on states’ defense not of their territory and sovereignty, per se, but of their position in the international system; that is, states use preventive force when they are beginning to decline relative to other potentially hostile powers. China’s current economic growth and military modernization, combined with its more assertive foreign policy in Asia, is thus perceived as a challenge to America’s status in Asia and even globally. Russia’s reemergence as a regional military power, a feat made possible by the enormous material gains buttressed by its natural gas exports, threatens the US and the EU’s status in Europe. These kinds of threats to status have less to do with imagery and more to do with the emerging potential for real world challenges.

Finally, organized groups of people, including states, often perceive threats to their values, whether religious, political, or socio-economic. The entire Cold War is frequently cast as a conflict over competing ideologies. The recent report (Flood 2014) that the CIA disseminated Doctor Zhivago in the USSR and that the Soviets banned it because each side believed its message was so powerful speaks to this. US actions in Vietnam are often explained by their intention to prevent the spread of communism (the falling of more dominoes), rather than as a local war against the North Vietnamese government and southern Vietnamese guerrillas. In this case, the preventive use of force was intended to draw a line in the sand in a country that otherwise had little strategic significance. The war was not to defeat communism or even specific communist states,
but to cut off at the pass the spread of the ideology before it began to tilt the global advantage towards the communists.

These kinds of concerns arise in different forms in different times. Today, countries in the west worry about a rising China because the state does not share western values and is increasingly well placed to undermine western efforts at international influence, as it has done by subverting US and European sanctions against Sudan, Syria, and Iran, among other things. Violent challenges by al Qaeda offshoots like Al Shabaab in Somalia, Boko Haram in Nigeria, the Taliban in Afghanistan and Pakistan, and the Moro rebels in the Philippines are also undertaken in the name of religion and societal values. Indeed, one could almost depict the early al Qaeda attacks against the United States as that transnational actor’s stab at preventive action: though there was no imminent threat of US expansion into the Middle East, globalization and westernization were perceived as creeping threats against Islamic values and the eventual creation of an independent Caliphate. (Musharbash 2005)

This conceptualization of threat as being related to values, ideology, and accepted practices is consistent with Samuel Huntington’s warnings (1993) in The Clash of Civilizations, in which he posited: “the greatest divisions among humankind and the dominating source of conflict will be cultural. Nation states will remain the most powerful actors in world affairs, but the principal conflicts of global politics will occur between nations and groups of different civilizations.” (22)

Conditions for Preventive Action

Lag and Predictability
While the categories above begin to help identify what critical interests states might seek to protect with preventive force, threats to these must share some characteristics for preventive responses to be possible. First, the threats must be lagged and predictable. Emphasis on lag derives from the definition of preventive military action, which requires that the threat being addressed is immature rather than imminent. This means that any threat that might be ameliorated with the preventive use of force must be observable in its early stages (before it develops into a full blown concern) and it should have predictable intent or consequences (that is, be identifiable as an incipient threat). This last is significant. In the absence of reasonable certainty that the emerging threat will not only fully materialize but also impose serious and perhaps existential costs on a country, it becomes difficult to justify the preventive use of force, especially in light of less costly and potentially more constructive alternatives to preventive military action.

Climate change is an ideal example of a predictable lagged existential threat: it is itself observable, as are its effects, which are intensifying over time and foreseeable. If we wish to avoid the direst predictions, or, at this point, at least prepare for them, climate change needs to be addressed proactively. Yet, while climate change meets the stipulations for lag and predictability, military action clearly would not be an appropriate response. We need an additional identifier.

*Targetable political perpetrators*

The final characteristic to make a threat amenable to preventive force is that it must emanate from a targetable political entity. This can be anything from an individual political leader, to a government, a non-state actor, or a coalition, but the potential threat must come from a person or people. And that person or those people must be targetable.
with military force; if they are wholly dispersed in a population or unidentifiable or in some other way made inaccessible, preventive military action will not be an option.

**Putting it all together**

Table 1 illustrates the extent to which the various types of threats mentioned thus far meet the initial criteria for preventive response (threats to key national interests, lagged, predictable, and undertaken by targetable political actors).

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Table 1[^6]</th>
<th>observable prior to maturity</th>
<th>predictable in their intent or consequences</th>
<th>from identifiable political entities</th>
<th>from targetable political entities</th>
<th>examples</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Foreign efforts to conquer some or all of a state’s territory</td>
<td>sometimes</td>
<td>yes</td>
<td>yes</td>
<td>yes</td>
<td>Russia’s invasion of Crimea</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Foreign efforts to overthrow or destabilize a state’s government and institutions</td>
<td>sometimes</td>
<td>yes</td>
<td>yes</td>
<td>yes</td>
<td>Russia’s support for rebels in Ukraine</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Internal threats</td>
<td>yes</td>
<td>yes</td>
<td>yes</td>
<td>no</td>
<td>Rebels in Ukraine</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Incursions or attacks on a state’s people or property by external non-state actors</td>
<td>sometimes</td>
<td>no</td>
<td>sometimes</td>
<td>sometimes</td>
<td>Hamas rocket attacks on Israel</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Attacks on a state’s power bases</td>
<td>sanctions</td>
<td>no</td>
<td>no</td>
<td>yes</td>
<td>yes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>denial of access to strategic areas</td>
<td>sometimes</td>
<td>yes</td>
<td>yes</td>
<td>yes</td>
<td>Iran’s build up of fast boat capabilities in the Strait of Hormuz</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>denial of access to strategic resources</td>
<td>sometimes</td>
<td>yes</td>
<td>yes</td>
<td>yes</td>
<td>China’s short-lived denial of rare earths to Japan</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Symbolic attacks on status</td>
<td>Ejection from IOs or alliances</td>
<td>no</td>
<td>yes</td>
<td>yes</td>
<td>yes</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

[^6]: This list is not exhaustive.
None of the threats listed conform entirely to the criteria for considering the preventive use of force. Internal threats come close, but, at least within the United States, the perpetrators would not be targetable with military force; such emerging concerns would be met with political and police responses. In more autocratic states, or in unstable states, such as Ukraine in 2014, however, the rise of such groups has indeed led to domestic preventive military responses. If these groups were perceived as emerging threats not only to their own governments, but to other states, as well, then there is the possibility for unilateral or even multilateral preventive military action. One could argue that this is the case in Somalia, where US and Somali forces are collaborating to eliminate extremists. In point of fact, however, for the Somali government, the threat is extant, not potential; only the US is debatably undertaking preventive military action and its efforts would fall into the incursions category in Table 1. The same could be said of US signature and personality strikes in places like Pakistan and Yemen.
The rise of competing powers conforms in every way except predictability, yet this variable is crucial. What if rising powers create opportunities rather than risks? If Britain in the late 1800s had attempted to check American power with war, for example, the outcome in terms of global stability and Britain’s own national interests would arguably have been much worse than occurred with the peaceful hegemonic shift that eventually took place.

Other categories of threats on the list remain open to the possibility of the effective preventive use of force even though they do not clearly meet all of the criteria. Incursions or attacks on a state’s people or property by terrorist groups, for example, might be anticipated, could be escalatory, could be assumed to be threatening (though to what extent is debatable), and would emanate from identifiable and targetable political entities (though external terrorist organizations based in other states would pose a dilemma in terms of targeting). The aforementioned US drone strikes in Yemen, Somalia, and Pakistan would be a response to perceived threats in this category. Likewise, attacks on a state’s values or ideology, at home or abroad, could definitely be observable early on, escalatory, and from identifiable political entities, though it might be hard to predict their effect (i.e. how many people would be persuaded or indoctrinated) and those entities might be difficult or impossible to target. This is in part because such perceived threats are often understood to be insidious, rather than blatant. The Red Scare in the United States in the 1950s played upon fears of communist infiltration just as the 2013 French decision to outlaw the niqab, or full face veil, reflects fear of growing Islamist influence in France. In both cases, perceptions of a menace against the national way of life did play out in the preventive use of force abroad: the US took its war against the communists to
Asia, Latin America, and Africa and today France is expanding its counterterrorism efforts in North and West Africa.

Some of the types of threats mentioned previously can be entirely removed from consideration of the practicability of preventive military action. Illegal immigration would be taken off the list (no identifiable or targetable political entity responsible); symbolic efforts to undermine a state’s status are not observable prior to maturity nor, in any serious sense, escalatory. Sanctions can be removed from the list, since they cannot be surreptitiously imposed. A response to drone strikes would be defensive rather than preventive. The very fact of a potential enemy having drones might raise concern, but that would fall more into the category of the rise of competing actors.

Significantly, most external efforts to conquer a state’s territory or overthrow its government should be removed from the list, since they cannot really be undertaken incrementally, so are unlikely to be lagged enough to qualify; the kinds of massing of troops or strategic movement of resources and materiel necessary to conquer a country or overthrow its regime would be more consistent with imminent warfare and therefore would be met with preemptive, rather than preventive, war. An exception to this might be a state that begins by conquering a neighbor but is perceived as being intent on continuing in the direction of the state considering preventive action (a juggernaut of sorts). This kind of WWII scenario of expansionism could be considered a lagged threat for the states not yet in immediate danger.

We now have six types of threats that meet the initial criteria we have thus far laid out for preventive responses. Having identified the kinds of potential threats that might justify the use of preventive force does not mean, however, that there is a clear
dichotomous choice between preventive military action and total inaction; there are always other options. Table 2 lays out both the costs and benefits of preventive action and various alternative responses to these potential threats.

Table 2

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Possible kinetic preventive responses*</th>
<th>Likely benefits</th>
<th>Likely costs</th>
<th>Possible alternative responses prior to threat fully materializing</th>
<th>Possible alternative responses if threat fully materializes</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Juggernaut or foreign efforts to overthrow a state’s government</td>
<td>Missile or air strikes on strategic targets Conventional war</td>
<td>Surprise Bring the war to the opponent Slow the advance Signal determination</td>
<td>Guarantees engagement Deploying troops abroad leaves fewer for defense Retaliation</td>
<td>Deterrence Diplomacy Collective security</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Rise of competing power or change in capabilities (i.e. nuclearization)</td>
<td>Missile or air strikes on strategic targets Conventional war</td>
<td>Slow or reverse opponent’s rise Destabilize opponent Undercut opponent’s ability to wage war Delay possibility of future full-blown warfare</td>
<td>Guarantee adversarial relationship; antagonize opponent Forego future economic and cooperative opportunities Spark retaliation Spark war Domestic and international political backlash</td>
<td>Diplomacy Trade Institutional ties Deterrence Collective security Strengthened defense</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Threats to values, etc.</td>
<td>Conventional war Proxy war Attacks on leaders Terrorism</td>
<td>Create fear Create economic costs Weaken or eliminate leadership</td>
<td>Backlash in target state or group International disapproval Spark retaliation Spark war</td>
<td>Counter-proselytize Reliance on soft power Aid for education and development International institutional responses</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Non-state actors’ attacks on people or</td>
<td>Attacks on leaders Attacks on</td>
<td>Decapitate organizations Create fear and Rally support to the group Enhance</td>
<td></td>
<td>Strengthened defense Soft power</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Property</td>
<td>Meeting places</td>
<td>Prevent association</td>
<td>Group’s recruitment</td>
<td>Diplomacy cooperation</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>----------</td>
<td>----------------</td>
<td>---------------------</td>
<td>--------------------</td>
<td>----------------------</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>meeting places</td>
<td>prevent association</td>
<td>Weaken or eliminate group</td>
<td>Push group underground or to diversify</td>
<td>with foreign governments and/or IOs to police and/or monitor</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Denial of access to strategic resources</td>
<td>Attacks on means of denial</td>
<td>Create pressure on decision-makers to allow access</td>
<td>Expedite decision to limit access</td>
<td>Diplomacy Economic incentives</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Attacking to weaken opponent overall</td>
<td>Attacks on means of denial</td>
<td>Create pressure on decision-makers to allow access</td>
<td>Expedite decision to limit access</td>
<td>Diversification of demand or suppliers</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Denial of access to strategic areas</td>
<td>Reduce opponent’s ability to deny access</td>
<td>Expedite decision to limit access</td>
<td>New defense technology and tactics, techniques &amp; procedures</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Attacks on means of denial</td>
<td>Maintain access to key strategic areas</td>
<td>Expedite limits to access</td>
<td>Negotiation Economic incentives</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Attacks to weaken opponent overall</td>
<td>Reduce opponent’s ability to deny access</td>
<td>Reduce cooperation and likelihood of future cooperation</td>
<td>Undermine relations</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Maintain access to key strategic areas</td>
<td>Undermine relations</td>
<td>Spark war</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

This is a useful tool. Consider the light it sheds on two different circumstances involving the rise of a competing power. On the one hand, the mitigating responses could be enough to prevent the threats from fully emerging or, better yet, to turn them into opportunities. As China has undertaken its “peaceful rise” over the past decades, for example, every one of the mitigating strategies listed has been implemented, as the US
and its friends and allies have attempted to tame and tangle the growing power with trade agreements, international organizations, and international laws even as they have also strengthened their own military capabilities and alliances. Of course, war could break out over Taiwan, or events in the South China Sea, but the years of peace did not leave the United States in a particularly weakened or precarious position relative to China. Not only are mitigating strategies still being implemented, but the deterrent effect of each state’s military development over the past decades is strong.

On the other hand, Israel chose to strike both Osirak and al-Kibar for fear that Iraq’s and Syria’s abilities to develop nuclear weapons would be fundamental game-changers creating unacceptable levels of threat to the Israeli state and populace. Neither preventive attack resulted in hot war; indeed, Israel understood from the outset that such a risk was mitigated by the United States having its back and raising the costs of retaliation. Moreover, Israel had nothing to lose politically or economically; it had antagonistic relations with both states and was already regularly and roundly criticized internationally. The constellation of relations, in turn, precluded any hope for effectively negotiating either state’s cessation of nuclear development: Israel had no leverage and the international community was hesitant to respond to either states’ nuclear developments. Neither the French nor the Americans believed Osirak signaled any serious threat of imminent nuclear weapons development and, when North Korean complicity in building al-Kibar in Syria was revealed, key American policymakers still preferred to respond diplomatically. (Abrams 2013) In Israel’s cost-benefit analysis, therefore, the potential threat was bigger than the risk assumed with the preventive strike and there was no better means for responding to it. In fact, intense American and allied economic and political
pressure on Iran to open its facilities to inspection and halt any nascent weapons production has been in part a function of understanding Israel’s cost-benefit analysis on the use of preventive force. While Iran would present a much riskier target for Israel than either Osirak or al-Kibar did – not least because of the lessons Iran learned from Israel’s attack on Iraq’s facility – Israel’s calculation remains essentially the same.

Table 2 also captures US actions against al Qaeda offshoots in Somalia and Yemen, among other places. The benefits are tangible and immediate, the actual costs of the operations are minimal, the projected costs are amorphous and hard to prove, and the alternatives are limited, complex, and unlikely to yield any short-term gains. The threats the groups pose to the US are certainly not existential, but given the US’s ability to absorb the costs of preventive strikes, eliminating the potential for these groups to organize attacks on the US homeland is not unreasonable.

The table suggests that preventive strikes against potential denial of access efforts might be acceptable if the risk is low (great power versus a much weaker state, for example) and relations are already lousy; even then, mitigating efforts would likely be preferable even for powerful states. Preventive military action to avert denial of resources is too self-fulfilling a prophecy to make sense unless the resources are important enough and the denier is weak and insignificant enough that its hand can be forced, its retaliation minimized, and the relationship with it corrupted without concern. If these conditions pertain, however, then the denier is likely weak enough to be amenable to economic threats or promises or other forms of negotiation. Whether the preventive use of force makes sense in the face of threats to values seems to depend on how vulnerable values are perceived to be; al Qaeda’s attacks on the US and the west suggest the fear that
westernization poses an existential threat that merits the assumption of great risks. That
the US retaliated, however, should not have been surprising.

Finally, the argument in favor of preventive action in the face of a juggernaut
seems strong, but even that is debatable. As a case in point, in early 2014, there were
some perceptions that Russia was poised to become a juggernaut; its actions in Crimea
and then in support of pro-Russian forces in eastern Ukraine created ripples of concern
throughout eastern Europe, prompting NATO to move materiel and manpower closer to
its members’ borders with Russia. Months later, a full-blown war had not materialized,
yet preventive military action at the outset of the hostilities would have been a self-
fulfilling prophecy guaranteeing war. Moreover, a little doubt as to the juggernaut’s
intentions can be enough – as World War II showed – to cause a state to hesitate, at
which point it will have to rely on a strong defense rather than the advantages of moving
the fight to the potential aggressor. And this may not be such a terrible thing, if its
defense is all the more solid for having all the forces at home and all the resources at
hand to sustain them, especially if the juggernaut might lose, rather than gain, momentum
as it approaches.

Political rationality and threat exaggeration

Thus far the assumption has been that the decision to use preventive force is a
rational calculation that involves weighing the costs and benefits of preventive military
action relative to either inaction or to alternative responses to a potential threat. Yet it is
necessary to point out that not only are there different types of rationality, but that limited
information imposes limitations on rationality, a particularly relevant concern when
potential, rather than materialized, threats are being identified and assessed.
To the first point, any foreign policy calculation will include not only the kinds of criteria outlined above but also decision makers’ personal equations, with an eye to their own images, agendas, and supporters. In their respective analyses of the domestic variables associated with foreign policy decisionmaking, Alex Mintz and Karl DeRouen (2010) and Bruce Bueno de Mesquita and David Lalman (1992) identified the key roles of politics and public opinion in decision makers’ analyses. In their—and others’—work on poliheuristic theory (including Mintz and Geva 1997; Redd 2005; Satha sivam 2003), the researchers examined specific cases and found that foreign policy decisions were deeply affected by decisionmakers’ assumptions about public support and the political viability of any option. This means that if politicians anticipate negative fall-out from failing to anticipate or prevent a crisis, for example, they are likely to be more supportive of preventive action. In the face of public statements like the one conservative commentator Charles Krauthammer put forward on Fox News in 2013, in which he called the president “adolescent, naïve, and dangerous” for declaring an end to the War on Terror (The Right Scoop 2013), US President Obama, for example, has reason to expect serious political ramifications if terrorists succeed in attacking the US homeland during his tenure. He is therefore more likely to take actions to avoid that risk than if he felt more politically secure.

Even assuming apolitical rationality, however, the biggest challenge in trying to develop a persuasive cost-benefit analysis for preventive war is that it hinges on the assessment of how serious a potential threat will be and such assessments are inherently subjective. Studies of political psychology consistently demonstrate tendencies to exaggerate threats. Though he was focusing on terrorism, John Mueller’s observations
(2005) about this tendency are generalizable. He wrote that it is “common to exaggerate and to overreact to foreign threats,” and that “alarmism and overreaction can be harmful” and can “help create the damaging consequences” opponents seek. (208) Janice Gross Stein (2013) wrote in detail about how emotional and cognitive processes can affect threat perception. And Robert Jervis’s work (1992) on prospect theory is particularly illuminating. He explained, for example, that, “more than the hope of gains, the specter of losses activates, energizes, and drives actors, producing great (and often misguided) efforts that risk – and frequently lead to – greater losses.” (Jervis 1992, 187) He continued, “People will choose the risky alternative when the choice is framed in terms of avoiding losses when, in the exact same case, they would take the less risky course of action if the frame of reference is the possibility of improving the situation.” (188) These observations illuminate George W. Bush’s now famous call (2002) to preventive war: “The greater the threat, the greater the risk of inaction – and the more compelling the case for taking anticipatory action to defend ourselves, even if uncertainty remains as to the time and place of the enemy’s attack.”7 (15)

Were the Israelis correct that a nuclear-armed Saddam Hussein or Bashar al-Assad would have threatened their existence? Is the US correct that the threats posed by al-Shabaab and their ilk merit the costs involved in hunting them down preventively? Should a preventive war be launched against Putin to foil his apparent territorial aspirations beyond Crimea? Was the US war in Vietnam necessary to prevent the dominoes from falling in Southeast Asia; did the war prevent the empowerment of the

7 It is worth noting that President Bush referred to this concept as preemptive, not preventive war, but his statements here and in his 2006 speech at the National Defense University were understood to be – and more consistent with – the latter.
Communist bloc or the spread of the communist ideology? Ultimately, the cost-benefit analysis can only be as good as the risk assessment upon which it is premised.

Conclusion

The unique nature of the preventive use of force – an offensive action for defensive ends in the face of tremendous uncertainty and likely domestic and international disapproval – already ensures that the strategy will only be the best policy response under extraordinary circumstances. The very nature of the action requires that the perceived threat be lagged, predictable, and imposed by targetable political actors. Additionally, there are two criteria for identifying when preventive action will be the best option: the potential threat must be bigger than the risks inherent in preventive action and the threat cannot be equally or better mitigated by any other means. Inherent in this calculation is that the anticipated threats must be to essential interests (sovereignty, sources of power, status, and principles) and strategies for tempering, mitigating, or even capturing and turning the anticipated threat – or to effectively respond to it if it develops fully – must not exist. These criteria help explain the fact that, even with policymakers’ potential miscalculations, risk aversion, and possible political motivations, the preventive use of force does and should remain rare. That said, powerful states (or those with powerful backers) can undertake preventive military action with relative impunity, though doing so will only be the best option if it meets the preceding criteria. It is therefore unsurprising that the few obvious cases of preventive force in recent decades can be attributed to the United States and Israel.
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