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PREEMPTIVE AND PREVENTIVE WAR:
A PRELIMINARY TAXONOMY

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Preemptive and Preventive War: A Preliminary Taxonomy

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Preemptive and Preventive War: A Preliminary Taxonomy

Abstract

The post-9/11 era has created a number of distinct and demanding national security challenges for the United States. One of the greatest challenges is to decide when and how to use military force. In the debate prior to the invasion of Iraq, policymakers, scholars, and pundits all discussed the concept of preventive war and its applicability to the situation in Iraq. Much of this debate shortchanged the critical differences between preemption and prevention. Our goal is to provide a taxonomy of the different circumstances under which the government of the United States should consider the use of military force prior to being attacked. We see three dimensions that define these circumstances. The first is a matter of *national strategy*: is the use of force preemptive or preventive? The second dimension is the *type of military action*: is the contemplated action a strike or a campaign? The third dimension is the *type of target*: is the potential target a terrorist group or a state? We believe that these three dimensions help to clarify the major considerations that should be placed on the table when the United States is debating the use of military force.

Preemptive and Preventive War: A Preliminary Taxonomy

“The old distinction between preemption and prevention, therefore, was one of the many casualties of September 11.” – John Lewis Gaddis¹

“Sixty years ago, the Japanese anticipated the Bush Doctrine in their attack on the U.S. Navy at Pearl Harbor.” – Arthur M. Schlesinger, Jr.²

Introduction

The doctrine of preventive war is surely one of the most controversial aspects of the Bush administration’s foreign policy. Announced by President George W. Bush during a speech at West Point June 1, 2002, and formalized in the National Security Strategy (NSS) issued three months later, the doctrine reflects a response to the terrorist attacks on the United States September 11, 2001³. In the words of the NSS, “the gravest danger our Nation faces lies at the crossroads of radicalism and technology.”⁴

According to the administration, traditional techniques such as deterrence and containment would simply not work against shadowy terrorist networks or unbalanced dictators with weapons of mass destruction (WMDs).⁵ To avert this danger, the NSS declares, the United States must be prepared to strike first: “Legal scholars and international jurists often conditioned the legitimacy of preemption on the existence of an imminent threat—most often a visible mobilization of armies, navies, and air forces preparing to attack. We must adapt the concept of imminent threat to the capabilities and objectives of today’s adversaries.”⁶ In his West Point address, the president was even blunter: “If we wait for threats to fully materialize, we will have waited too long.”⁷

¹ John Lewis Gaddis, “Grand Strategy in the Second Term,” *Foreign Affairs* 84, No. 1 (January/February, 2005), p. 5.

² Arthur M. Schlesinger, Jr., *War and the American Presidency*, (New York, N.Y.: W.W. Norton & Co., 2004), p. 23.

³ Both the president’s West Point Speech and the National Security Strategy (NSS) of 17 September 2002 are available online at <http://www.whitehouse.gov>.

⁴ Bush, NSS, Introduction.

⁵ WMDs are chemical, biological, and nuclear weapons.

⁶ Bush, NSS, p. 15.

⁷ Bush, West Point Speech.

Preemptive and Preventive War: A Preliminary Taxonomy

The doctrine of preventive war is far from a merely theoretical construct. Even before its issuance, the doctrine would be used by the administration as one of the justifications for the future invasion of Iraq.⁸ President Bush's then-national security advisor Condoleezza Rice memorably summed up the argument to remove Saddam Hussein on preventive grounds: "The problem here is that there will always be some uncertainty about how quickly he (Saddam) can acquire nuclear weapons. But we don't want the smoking gun to be a mushroom cloud."⁹ In addition, preventive war remains very much on the table in the ongoing dispute over Iran's nuclear program.

Criticism of the doctrine—both before and after the U.S. and allied invasion of Iraq in March 2003—has been far-ranging in both the political and academic arenas. Scholars have differed sharply on whether the doctrine does in fact mark a decisive change in U.S. policy.¹⁰ Other analyses have focused on the doctrine's legality, morality, and utility as an instrument of U.S. foreign policy. In this paper, we will focus on the last. In particular, we will try to a) highlight the differences between preventive and preemptive war; b) distinguish between types of preventive action, notably localized strikes and full-scale war; and c) assess, very provisionally, the usefulness of such action against both sovereign states and nonstate terrorist groups.

We treat each of these three dimensions as a simple dichotomy. We believe this is the best way to introduce the essential features of each. Our object is to develop what could be called a taxonomy of preventive/preemptive war—a preliminary classification of the various types of action that fall under it.

⁸ The administration put forward a number of justifications for the war. They included enforcement of UN resolutions, the liberation of the Iraqi people, and the creation of a model of Arab democracy in the Middle East.

⁹ CNN Late Night Edition with Wolf Blitzer, September 8, 2002.

¹⁰ For instance, John Lewis Gaddis sees the Iraq War as merely the latest in a series of U.S. preventive wars reaching back to the early 19th century. In his West Point Address, Gaddis writes, President Bush "...was echoing an old tradition rather than establishing a new one. Adams, Jackson, Polk, McKinley, Roosevelt, Taft and Wilson would all have understood it perfectly well." John Lewis Gaddis, *Surprise, Security, and the American Experience*, (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 2004), p. 22. (This claim does not necessarily contradict his argument, quoted at the outset of this paper, that 9/11 ended the distinction between preventive and preemptive wars; Gaddis appears to suggest that the commonly held distinction between these two types of action arose during the Cold War period. Gaddis 2005: pp. 3-4.) Arthur M. Schlesinger, Jr., in contrast, stresses the extent to which the Bush Doctrine marks a discontinuity in post-World War II U.S. foreign policy. See his quote at the beginning of this essay.

Preemptive and Preventive War: A Preliminary Taxonomy

Type of National Strategy

The first dimension is the type of *national strategy*. The two categories of national strategy are preemption and prevention.¹¹ Preemption is the taking of military action against a target when there is incontrovertible evidence that the target is about to initiate a military attack. Prevention is the taking of military action against a target when it is believed that an attack by the target, while not imminent, is inevitable, and when delay in attacking would involve greater risk. We provide hypothetical examples of each.

Imagine during the Cold War that the United States intercepted and decoded a message from the leadership of the Soviet Union ordering a nuclear first strike against the United States. But the U.S. leadership was able to order and carry out a nuclear strike against the Soviet Union before Moscow was able to launch weapons against the United States. This would be an example of preemption. Now imagine that during the Cold War the U.S. leadership concluded that (a) the Soviet Union would at some point in the future launch an attack against the United States and that (b) in a few years the Soviet Union would be able to inflict significantly more damage on the United States than they could at the present time. An attack is not underway in this scenario. However if the United States launched an attack against the Soviet Union under these circumstances, this would be prevention.¹²

Type of Military Action

The second dimension is type of *military action*. The two categories are a strike or a campaign. A strike is a fairly discrete military operation. It can involve attacking more than one target and

¹¹ The definitions of these terms are based on the Department of Defense (DOD) Dictionary of Military Terms (available at <http://www.dtic.mil/doctrine/jel/doddict/>).

¹² During the early years of the Cold War a number of high-ranking officials in the U.S. government discussed the concept of a preventive war against the Soviet Union. This was not done for a number of reasons: (a) presidents had a personal aversion to the idea and worried about hostile world reaction to it; (b) the United States had a limited supply of atomic weapons and these would have been insufficient for a complete air campaign against the Soviet Union; (c) the Soviet Union could have retaliated by using its conventional forces in Europe; (d) there were other ways to contain the threat from the Soviet Union. Russell D. Buhite and William Christopher Hammel, "War for Peace: The Question of American Preventive War against the Soviet Union," *Diplomatic History* 14, no. 3 (Summer, 1990), pp. 367-384.

Preemptive and Preventive War: A Preliminary Taxonomy

might extend over a short period of days. But the objective would be to destroy a discrete number of targets or (perhaps) to seize certain people or objects. A campaign is a more extensive series of military operations that have a common objective. This might be less than a war and/or an occupation of a country, although it could range up to that level.

Imagine that the U.S. government learned that a “rogue state” was developing a WMD, and that these efforts were focused on a small number of facilities. A coordinated series of air attacks against these facilities would be a strike. Now imagine a different “rogue state” that is repeatedly both threatening and taking aggressive actions against its neighbors. The U.S. response is to invade and conquer the rogue state; this would be a campaign. A strike lasts a short period of time, only long enough to stage the raid (or raids). A campaign involves multiple military actions that are designed to lead to a common goal. It can last an extended period of time.

Type of Target

Our final dimension is the type of *target* of the military action. The two categories we consider are terrorist group and state. A state is a government exercising control over a territory and the people who reside there. A terrorist group is a collection of individuals bonded together by a common cause and prepared to use violence to create panic and fear.

In many ways this is the easiest category to describe. A nonstate group (terrorists) may be present in a variety of countries with only a low level coordination between the elements. We presume that the United States would make a series of discrete attacks on terrorist targets. If our opponent was a state, then we presume the United States would consider a variety of options ranging from discrete strikes at various specific targets all the way to an invasion (and occupation) of an entire country.

Terrorist Groups: National Strategy and Military Action

How should the United States respond if a terrorist group has taken action against the United States or has declared its intention to do so (the functional equivalent of the declaration of war by

Preemptive and Preventive War: A Preliminary Taxonomy

a state)? In these circumstances, both prevention and preemption are justified, as they would be during formal hostilities.¹³ The choice may turn primarily on the availability of intelligence.

If there is credible intelligence that a terrorist group will attack the United States, there is no question that it would be appropriate for the United States to conduct a military operation to take preventive action to stop such an attack. Such a measure would be supported by the American people and would be deemed acceptable by many other governments.

We would also argue that if a terrorist group has previously attacked the United States or has declared “war” on the United States by means of a statement, preventive action is also justified. Given the sporadic nature of terrorist attacks, it may appear that the threat has disappeared or, in the case of a group merely “declaring war,” does not really exist. But nevertheless if there is an opportunity to attack and damage such a group prior to it launching an attack on the United States it should be seized.

As for the type of military action, a campaign would be preferable. The reason is simple: given the nature of terrorism, it would be difficult, if not impossible, to defeat a terrorist group in a single strike. But in most cases, terrorist groups do not provide the targeting structure to carry off this approach. There are a variety of reasons for this. For example, most terrorist groups are dispersed across a number of cells with little contact between them. So at any time, there may not be enough information to stage a campaign. Consequently, in most situations, governments are reduced to attacking terrorist organizations on a piecemeal basis, using a series of individual strikes.

States: National Strategy and Military Action

The question of the national strategy and military action to be taken if the target is a state is more complicated than if the target is a terrorist group. To clarify the question we must consider

¹³ An example of such action would be the 1998 strike against purported al-Qa’ida facilities in Afghanistan and Sudan ordered in the wake of the attack on the USS Cole. Bill Clinton, *My Life*, (New York, N.Y.: Knopf, 2004), pp. 798-9.

Preemptive and Preventive War: A Preliminary Taxonomy

several categories of problems that could be faced by the U.S. government. In particular we will consider three types of problems that could be caused by a state that would lead it to become a potential target of U.S. military action. This is not meant to be an exhaustive list, but it serves as a useful device to consider the costs and benefits of the choices available to the United States.

The State is Developing WMDs

Needless to say, it would be critical that the United States have a high degree of certainty that development was underway. Prevention would involve an attack before the weapons were operational. There can be two uncertainties in these situations. The first is whether development is actually underway. If there is considerable certainty that development is underway, the second uncertainty comes into play: what will the state do with these weapons once they are developed? It is likely that these two sources of uncertainty will combine to create a situation in which it will be hard for the United States to justify a preventive attack.¹⁴ Should the lack of support lead the United States to forego an opportunity for prevention? Not necessarily. But if support from other countries is important for future U.S. actions, then the lack of foreign support is a serious drawback for this strategy (more comments on this below).

What about preemption? If a strike using WMDs is underway (or almost underway), then U.S. action would be justified. As well, we presume that in these circumstances there would be significant evidence of the impending enemy attack, and—at least *post hoc*—a good chance that the United States could justify its actions. Obviously this situation is far more dangerous to the United States with some chance that (in the words of then-National Security Advisor Rice) the smoking gun would be a mushroom cloud.

What is the most appropriate military action in these circumstances? A strike against the WMD facilities of the target would serve to eliminate (or if not totally successful, greatly reduce) the threat faced by the United States and its friends and allies. As well, there is a sense of proportionality about such a strike. The target(s) are those facilities that pose a direct threat to the

¹⁴ For example, if the probability that WMD development is underway is .6 and the probability that any weapons that are developed would be used against the United States or its interests is .3 then the probability of both occurring is .18. It is easy to imagine that if other countries make this same calculation, they would be reluctant to endorse a preventive attack by the United States, particularly in light of the lack of Iraqi WMDs.

Preemptive and Preventive War: A Preliminary Taxonomy

United States. As well, such a targeting strategy reduces collateral damage,¹⁵ and would therefore probably be more acceptable to other countries.

But there are drawbacks to this strategy. First, the available intelligence may not allow the United States to identify all the components of the target's WMD program.¹⁶ Second, some of the facilities may be hardened and will successfully resist attack. So any strike could leave some facilities still functioning. Third, even if a strike was successful, it may be possible for the target state to rebuild or replace the damaged and destroyed facilities. Of course, a partially successful strike might cause the target state to abandon its WMD programs. But even if the strike was completely successful, the target state might decide to construct new facilities and continue with its WMD program. The result is a delay in the program, but not its termination.

These drawbacks might lead the United States to consider a campaign rather than a strike. If the U.S. government concluded that the target state would rebuild its WMD program, this would suggest that the WMD program was a consequence of the real problem, but not its cause. The cause is the set of policies being pursued by the target state's government. And the solution is to militarily defeat the target state and replace its government. However recent events in Iraq illustrate that a campaign may entail considerable costs in blood, time, and treasure in order to bring order and stability to the post-war environment.

The State is Behaving Aggressively Toward Friends and Allies of the United States

This is a familiar problem for U.S. decision makers. It was a major concern during the Cold War. A number of the issues to be considered when deciding on strategy and action are the same as in the previous situation of WMD development. Therefore, we will only highlight the aspects of this situation that are different from the scenario of a state developing WMDs.

¹⁵ This assumes that such strikes would not serve to activate the WMDs and create large-scale damage to the homeland and the people of the target country. If this happened, it would undoubtedly prompt significant resentment against the United States throughout the world. This prospect, in turn, creates a pressure to be very careful in the attacks and, above all, to strike before the weapons or their components pose a risk to neighboring areas. Unfortunately, this tends to move the attacks out of the realm of preemption and back into the realm of prevention.

¹⁶ This seems increasingly likely in the post-Iraq invasion world. While it is certainly possible that some states concluded that to develop WMDs would be to make the state a target of U.S. military actions, it seems equally possible that other states concluded that the only way to protect themselves from U.S. attack was to devise a WMD program that includes multiple hardened facilities that would be difficult to identify and target.

Preemptive and Preventive War: A Preliminary Taxonomy

In this situation it would be more difficult to justify a preventive strike. If the state was developing WMDs, there is at least the possibility that other countries or the International Atomic Energy Agency will support the allegation by the United States. If this happened, it would help to provide justification for a U.S. preventive action. But we feel it is less likely the United States would be able to find a third party to provide an independent source of information to justify preventive action against the target state. As for preemption, it is unlikely that the target would be attacking the United States. Instead we would expect that it would be attacking a friend or ally that is under U.S. protection. And because there is no direct threat to the United States this would make it more difficult to justify a preemptive attack against the target.

The option of a strike is less attractive in this situation than if the target state is developing WMDs. The problem is that a strike¹⁷ is unlikely to significantly diminish the military power of the target. At best a strike will serve as a “warning shot.” But it appears that this tactic is unlikely to permanently remove the threat posed by the target to the friends and/or allies of the United States.

The pros and cons of a campaign are basically the same as when the target is developing WMDs.

The State is Supporting Terrorism

As with the state behaving aggressively, we will highlight the differences in this situation from the WMD case. The first consideration is whether the state acknowledges that it is supporting a terrorist group. If the state acknowledges it is supporting such a group, this should provide the justification for military action by the United States either by a preventive attack or a preemptive attack.¹⁸

If the state is providing significant support for the terrorist group, then a military action of strike would not appear to be very fruitful. Destruction of a series of targets related to the terrorist group and/or the state supporting terrorism would seem to have little long-term impact on the operation of the terrorist group; what was destroyed could be rebuilt. The only way that this

¹⁷ Recall that a strike may involve attacks on a series of targets over a relatively discrete period of time.

¹⁸ There was widespread international support for U.S. action against the Taliban and al-Qa’ida in Afghanistan in the wake of the 9/11 attacks and the subsequent refusal of the Taliban to turn over al-Qa’ida members.

Preemptive and Preventive War: A Preliminary Taxonomy

action could lead to a positive outcome is if it convinces the host government to abandon its support for the terrorist group.

We believe that the characteristics of this situation make a campaign the more likely choice. The goal of the campaign could be to eliminate the terrorist group or to overthrow the government. But a successful campaign would necessitate extensive follow-up, perhaps including nation-building.

If the state does not acknowledge its support of the terrorist group, the pros and cons of national strategies and military actions for the United States remain the same. But the costs of each option may be greater because it may be more difficult to convince other countries that there is a valid reason for an attack against the target state. Is this a problem? Not if the United States can guarantee its national security exclusively by its own efforts. But if the United States needs help to gather intelligence, or even to conduct military operations against targets, this could be a considerable drawback.

Historical Examples

Unsurprisingly, history offers few examples that conform perfectly to what could be called the ideal types of preemptive or preventative war. There clearly exists a continuum of action often marked by complex causality and ambiguous motives.

For instance, one routinely cited example of preemptive war—the Israeli attack on Egypt and Syria June 5, 1967—actually presents a more complicated picture. The months leading to the Israeli cabinet's June 3 decision to go to war were marked by escalating tension between Israel and its Arab neighbors.¹⁹ Responding to a series of cross-border terrorist attacks, Israeli forces launched a brief incursion into Jordan in November 1966. In April 1967, Syrian shelling of northern Israel led to a short but sharp air battle in which Israeli jets administered a humiliating defeat on their Syrian counterparts. In May, Egyptian President Gamal Nasser took a series of

¹⁹ Eric Hammel, *Six Days in June: How Israel Won the 1967 Arab-Israeli Conflict*, (New York, N.Y.: Scribner, 1992) pp. 5-45 and pp. 139-161; Jeremy Bowen, *Six Days: How the 1967 War Shaped the Middle East*, (New York, N.Y.: Simon and Schuster, 2003), pp. 5-93.

Preemptive and Preventive War: A Preliminary Taxonomy

steps—notably demanding the removal of UN peacekeepers from most of the Sinai and closing the straits of Tiran—that raised further raised tension. Nasser’s rhetoric grew more heated as June approached, declaring on May 28 that “We plan to open a general assault on Israel. This will be total war. Our basic aim is the destruction of Israel.”²⁰ Egypt and Syria moved troops into positions in the Sinai and the Golan Heights. Jordan’s King Hussein visited Cairo May 30, militarily aligning himself with Egypt and Syria—a step that raised the specter of a three-front war in Tel Aviv.

Yet the Israeli attacks of June 5 fall short of a strict definition of preemptive war. None of the major Arab countries had yet decided on full-scale hostilities; indeed, some of the best units in the Egyptian army remained deployed in Yemen as elements of Nasser’s ill-fated intervention there. While most Israeli decision makers believed that war with Israel’s Arab neighbors was inevitable, not all believed it was imminent.²¹ Indeed, the cabinet meeting that decided on war was heated, and two of 14 ministers voted against action.²² The decision to attack was largely driven by a belief—in retrospect, correct that an early war would catch Israel’s enemies off-guard and maximize Israel’s opportunity to inflict a decisive defeat on increasingly hostile and united neighbors. Thus, the Six-Day War contains elements of both preemption and prevention.

The Israeli strike on Iraq’s Osirak nuclear facility June 7, 1981, closely approximates a true preventive attack. Israel sent aircraft through Saudi Arabian and Iraqi airspace to strike the incomplete reactor at a site north of Baghdad. Fearful that the reactor might be used to create plutonium for an Iraqi nuclear weapons program, the Israeli government under Menachem Begin—forgoing further efforts to persuade the French government to cease its support for the reactor—chose to strike the reactor before it became operational. It should be noted that the attack was widely criticized at the time. Even the United States joined in a Security Council Resolution condemning Israel’s action.²³ The fact that the United States voted to condemn the raid suggests that, while some countries voted because of their general hostility to Israel, for the

²⁰ Hammel, *Six Days in June*, p. 36.

²¹ Hammel stresses that Israel’s decision was driven by an assessment of Arab capabilities—specifically their ability to launch a three-front war against Israel after Hussein’s embrace of Nasser on May 30. *Ibid*, p. 39.

²² Michael B. Oren, *Six Days of War*, (New York: Random House, 2002), p.157.

²³ United Nations Security Council Resolution 487 passed unanimously on 19 June 1981. See <http://www.UN.org/Docs/sc/> for text and voting.

Preemptive and Preventive War: A Preliminary Taxonomy

United States (and perhaps others), the vote represented a general disapproval of the notion of a preventive strike.

While Israel's strike against the Osirak Reactor may be a clear instance of a preventive *strike*, it does not represent an example of preventive *war*. It did not lead to further overt hostilities between Israel and Iraq, much less an invasion and occupation—an important conceptual and practical distinction.

A clear example of preventive war is the Russo-Japanese War which took place in 1904 and 1905. Both Russia and Japan were seeking to expand their influence in Korea. Many scholars would argue that some sort of military conflict between the two countries was inevitable. The conflict did begin and the Japanese initiated it. A comment by a Japanese minister provides a succinct explanation for why the Japanese acted: “We do not want war, for it would cost us so much, and we have nothing to gain even if we win; but by keeping the peace too long we may even lose our national existence.”²⁴

Perhaps the most famous—or infamous—of preventive wars is arguably the Pacific War launched by Japan's surprise attack on Pearl Harbor. U.S.-Japanese relations had deteriorated steadily in the decade following Japan's seizure of Manchuria in 1931-32. They took a sharp turn for the worse with the Japanese-German-Italian Tripartite (“Axis”) Agreement (September 1940) and Japan's occupation of French Indochina (1940-41), culminating with President Roosevelt's decision to impose an embargo on oil exports to Japan and a seizure of Japanese assets in the United States (July 1941). By December 1941, many in Tokyo and Washington believed war to be inevitable.²⁵ Japan's decision to go to war was driven in large part by this belief and by fears that the U.S. oil embargo would impair Japan's war-making capabilities within months.²⁶ Given these facts, it was better to strike sooner than later.

²⁴ Richard Connaughton, *Rising Sun and Tumbling Bear: Russia's War with Japan*, (London: Cassell, 2003), p.23.

²⁵ Like the Russo-Japanese War, the Japanese attack on Pearl Harbor reveals the difficulty of distinguishing between a preventive war and a simple war of aggression. In the case of the Pearl Harbor, for instance, war was only “inevitable” because Japan was committed to a policy of expansion in China and Indochina unacceptable to the United States.

²⁶ Michael Slackman, *Target: Pearl Harbor*, (Honolulu, Hawaii: University of Hawaii Press, 1990) p. 5.

Preemptive and Preventive War: A Preliminary Taxonomy

World War I presents an altogether more complicated picture. Nearly a century after it began, the origins of the Great War remain a subject of intense scholarly interest and considerable dispute. Yet preemption clearly played an important role in the series of decisions that led to a struggle for European mastery, and a conflict that, it could be argued, ended only with the final withdrawal of Russian troops from East Germany in 1994. In his recent book, *Europe's Last Summer: Who Started the Great War in 1914?*, historian David Fromkin places the blame for the war squarely on Austro-Hungary and Germany.²⁷ Yet both Vienna and Berlin acted in large part for preemptive reasons: Vienna was keen to crush Serbia because of the perceived threat pan-Slavism posed to the multinational Austro-Hungarian Empire; Berlin was eager to defeat Russia before the latter could overtake it militarily.

Like the Japanese attack on Pearl Harbor, the decisions by Berlin and Vienna in 1914 highlight the practical difficulty of distinguishing preemptive wars from what we commonly consider wars of aggression. Indeed, it could be argued that a realist theory of international affairs—under which states ceaselessly jockey for primacy—suggests that the distinction approaches the meaningless. In a Hobbesian world of interstate rivalry, any state or alliance of states is a potential enemy and war—whether it is called preemptive or aggressive—merely one of the instruments of preserving or extending power.

Conclusion

Where does the 2003 U.S. invasion of Iraq fit on the preventive-preemptive continuum? While both terms have been used to describe the war—a conflation that has led to much confusion—the answer is clear: preventive. There was no evidence that the regime of Saddam Hussein was about to launch an attack on the United States; the United States attacked to foreclose the possibility of Iraq doing so at some indeterminate point in the future. Indeed, when U.S. forces failed to find

²⁷ David Fromkin, *Europe's Last Summer: Who Started the Great War in 1914?* (New York: Vintage, 2005), pp. 286-291

Preemptive and Preventive War: A Preliminary Taxonomy

any WMDs in Iraq, the Bush administration went to great pains to deny it had ever suggested that Iraq represented an “imminent threat.”²⁸

The administration is clearly right to suggest that the confluence of international terrorism and WMDs represents a unique and deadly challenge to the United States and the international community. The legitimacy of traditional preemptive action is already widely accepted as implicit in the right to self-defense. More assertive measures—preventive action before an imminent threat arises—may at times be necessary; a recent UN panel of experts has suggested as much, though carefully hedging its finding with strict criteria and a requirement for Security Council approval.²⁹

But as our approach demonstrates, we must recognize the complexity of the issues involved. There are important distinctions to be made if we are to assess risks and rewards as we consider action. The first distinction, as we have discussed, is between preemptive and preventive action. Unlike some observers, we believe that such a distinction remains useful.³⁰ The imponderables associated with preventive action—notably, its dependence upon accurate intelligence as to enemy intent and capabilities—make it both riskier as an individual exercise and more problematic as an international norm. The embarrassing failure of the vast U.S. intelligence apparatus accurately to assess Saddam Hussein’s WMD program is sobering in this regard. But the other distinctions we have drawn—between types of action and types of target—are also critical if we are to navigate through the post-9/11 landscape.

There is one other aspect of taking military action that we have not discussed; we want to make brief mention of it here. This is whether to take unilateral or multilateral military action. On balance, while the United States must always maintain the option of acting unilaterally when its security is at stake, it is better to work with a willing coalition. In the words of the Bush

²⁸ See the White House Press Briefing of 20 January 2004. Available at <http://www.whitehouse.gov>.

²⁹ See *A More Security World: Our Shared Responsibility*, Report of the High-Level Panel on Threats, Challenges and Change. Available at <http://www.un.org>.

³⁰ See, for instance, the Gaddis quote at the beginning of this essay.

Preemptive and Preventive War: A Preliminary Taxonomy

administration's 2002 statement on the national security strategy of the United States, "no nation can build a safer, better world alone."³¹

Of course, there is an overhead in working with others; here we list a few of the drawbacks. There has to be general agreement among most—if not all—of our partners before anything can be done.³² Even with general agreement, actions have to be coordinated, and this can take time. Consequently, multilateral actions are not always easy to conduct.³³

But nevertheless, it is hard to see how the United States can prevail against global terrorist groups without significant help from others. In part this is a matter of cost. Working with others reduces the resources that the United States must commit. For example, as we are all well aware, the ground forces of the United States currently bear a heavy burden in Iraq, one that may make it difficult to commit (and sustain) a significant number of troops to other contingencies. But there is more to it than that. In some situations other countries provide resources that we simply cannot duplicate. Some countries may have knowledge about the location of terrorists. Others may have information about the finances of groups opposed to the United States. And still others may possess the ability to go places and interact with people that are beyond the research of the United States and its resources. At a minimum, by voluntarily submitting our policy to the constraints—if not necessarily the veto—of ad hoc coalitions or multilateral forums we build confidence among potential allies worried about American dominance,³⁴ this in turn increases the chances that countries will cooperate with us in the future. Finally, multilateral action—by spreading the material burden and bolstering international legitimacy—can help sustain U.S. domestic support for antiterrorist policies abroad.

³¹ Bush, NSS, Introduction.

³² This is true even among our long-term partners. NATO's decision making requires unanimity.

³³ For an insider's account of the problems faced by NATO in the bombing campaign against Serbia and Kosovo, see Wesley Clark, *Waging Modern War: Bosnia, Kosovo, and the Future of Combat* (New York, N.Y.: Public Affairs, 2001).

³⁴ See "The End of the Neo-Conservative Moment" by G. John Ikenberry, *Survival*, vol. 46, no. 1 (Spring 2004), p. 16. As is clear from the title of his essay, Ikenberry is no admirer of the Bush Administration's foreign policy. But even Gaddis, a (qualified) supporter of the Bush Doctrine, stresses the importance of "tact, flexibility, and a willingness to listen" to allies (Gaddis 2005, p. 12)

Preemptive and Preventive War: A Preliminary Taxonomy

This brings us to our final point. The choices we make about taking military action can have a dramatic impact on the level of international cooperation we receive. It takes no great insight to recognize that many countries are uncomfortable with the notion of a preventive strike or campaign. One simply has to recall the U.S. vote against Israel in the aftermath of the Osirak raid. Thus the U.S. government should carefully weigh the costs and benefits of military actions, especially unilateral actions.

There are no simple choices here. We do not want the first warning of a new terrorist threat to be a mushroom cloud over an American city. However the highly aggressive pursuit of short-term advantage by the United States can also backfire and lead to disaster. We have no pat solutions to simplify the decision-making process when considering the use of force. But we do believe that the best way to frame the problem is through a careful consideration of the characteristics and pros and cons of each major choice.