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Prevention, Not Preemption

It is difficult to argue with the principle that it is better to deal with threats as they develop rather than after they are realized. This may be especially true when those threats originate "at the crossroads of radicalism and technology," as President George W. Bush warned in his June 2002 West Point commencement address. This intersection now affords certain rogue actors in the international system the opportunity to acquire weapons of mass destruction (WMD) and to contemplate their use. Under such circumstances, Bush warned that deterrence, evidently successful during the Cold War against a risk-averse adversary, would prove ineffective. Against stateless and militant terrorist groups who have shown little evidence of cautious decisionmaking, it might be necessary to take the initiative. The much-quoted September 2002 U.S. National Security Strategy (NSS) officially advocated preemption to address these threats.[1] Yet, as this document acknowledges, deterrence still has a role in certain situations while preemption, widely cited as the new fulcrum of U.S. security strategy, was never ruled out in the past. New circumstances may very well call for a new strategy, but this transition is unlikely to take the form of a simple switch from deterrence to preemption. Both concepts harken back to earlier periods in international relations, and although they are not wholly obsolescent, neither can form the basis of a new strategy.

Distinguishing Preemption from Prevention

Before considering their contemporary relevance, it is necessary to investigate the meaning of these concepts and add a third—prevention—that perhaps better defines what is often currently referred to as preemption. Both

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preemption and prevention can be considered controlling strategies, that is, they do not rely on adversaries making cautious decisions. They assume that, given the opportunity, an adversary will use force and therefore cannot be afforded the option in the first place. In contrast, coercive strategies such as deterrence assume that an adversary's relevant calculations can be influenced. An actor's readiness to pursue a controlling strategy can, of course, reinforce a coercive one, such as deterrence, by reminding the target of the potential consequences of noncompliance.

Consider country A in conflict with country B. Because of its strength and determination to defend its vital interests, A is confident that it has deterred B. Deterrence works because B cannot foresee any prospect of substantial gains: it would face either tough resistance from A (deterrence by denial) or punitive retaliation (deterrence by punishment). But what happens if A sees that B is getting stronger so that in time B could advance and overwhelm resistance or blunt the impact of retaliation?

Aware of this possibility, A may decide to act to prevent B from reaching this position. This would qualify as a preventive war if it had at least one of two potential objectives. The first, at a minimum, would be to disarm B to keep it unambiguously militarily inferior. The second would be to change the political character of B's state so that, even if allowed to rearm, it would no longer pose a threat. The latter, more ambitious objective would be more militarily demanding, but disarmament without regime change would mean that an embittered victim would just rearm with greater vigor. Prevention exploits existing strategic advantages by depriving another state of the capability to pose a threat and/or eliminating the state's motivation to pose a threat through regime change. Thus, prevention provides a means of confronting factors that are likely to contribute to the development of a threat before it has had the chance to become imminent.

Should A decide not to instigate a preventive war and B acquire that extra strength, then B may come to feel with time that it has acquired the upper hand and can safely take initiative against A. At this point, A may come to regret its past restraint and decide that there is no more time to lose. A preemptive war takes place at some point between the moment when an enemy decides to attack—or, more precisely, is perceived to be about to attack—and when the attack is actually launched. This is where there might be a legal justification for anticipatory self-defense. For A, the challenges lie in both the quality of the evidence of imminent attack and the ability of its forces to disrupt the attack at this stage. If not disrupted effectively, then A's attack is bound to prompt a response from B that otherwise might have been avoided. After all, a favorable balance of power is not the only factor that influences an actor's decision to go to war, and there might have been good reason for B to have eschewed taking advantage of its new military superiority or at least

waiting until there was a genuine cause to use it. Thus, preemption, especially if prompted by a worst-case assumption about what an opponent might be planning, could well start a war when there might not have been one otherwise, in the hope that in taking the initiative the balance of power will have been reset in A's favor, whether or not B retaliates and a war continues.

So long as one sets aside larger issues, such as the opinion of the international community or the effect on an actor's ability to form coalitions and alliances, then once an actor supposes that the onset of war is inevitable, it is best to initiate it and to do so with a surprise attack. By knocking aside enemy capability, an actor can gain critical strategic advantage, often measured historically in territory, forcing the enemy into retreat, and buying time to consolidate before the counteroffensive begins. One has to be very certain, however, that the targeted state would otherwise take military action before taking preemptive measures or at least be very anxious that conceding the initiative will result in disaster.

Neither deterrence nor preemption can form the basis of a new strategy.

Prevention is cold blooded: it intends to deal with a problem before it becomes a crisis, while preemption is a more desperate strategy employed in the heat of crisis. Prevention can be seen as preemption in slow motion, more anticipatory or forward thinking, perhaps even looking beyond the target's current intentions to those that might develop along with greatly enhanced capabilities. There is, in addition, another important difference. With prevention, A has great advantages in deciding when to attack and doing so while B remains inferior. It should be possible to find an optimum moment when B is quite unprepared and not at all alert. Even if B can fully appreciate what A is planning, it might still be helpless. With preemption, on the other hand, B may no longer be inferior nor unprepared, causing the possibility that A, even if taking only precautionary moves to prepare a preemptive contingency, might be noticed and provoke B's first strike. Preemption requires, at the very least, that A believe it is more likely to win a war it initiates.

An attack that does not cripple the enemy will only succeed if good use can be made politically, as well as militarily, of the extra time gained as the enemy recovers. Preemption is directed specifically at the enemy's most dangerous capabilities and thus sets for itself a very serious but unambiguous test. If B's targeted capability escapes largely unscathed, then it is likely to be used at once. If the concern was serious enough to warrant the attack, then the military consequences of failure must be very severe. With prevention, by contrast, the military test is bound to be milder, because of B's inferiority. As with preemptive action, regardless of the

enemy's actual intentions, it will usher in an irreversible move from peace to war, but one in which victory should be assured. The political test, on the other hand, will be much more severe, with the threat more distant and open to subjective interpretation. The superior power can expect to be accused of bullying, acting prematurely, perhaps on no more than a hunch. To the extent that A does not care about international opinion, this may not matter, but without a compelling cause, preventive war can soon look like any other sort of aggressive war and thus provoke a reaction elsewhere—from diplomatic isolation to the formation of alliances among potential victims.

Deterrence in Hindsight

These political limitations were very evident during the Cold War. Washington considered the possibility of preventive war through the mid-1950s while the United States had, at first, a nuclear monopoly and then clear superiority, even as the Soviet Union was feverishly working to catch up. The possibility of initiating preventive war was serious at times, especially when it became evident that Moscow was close to acquiring a thermonuclear capability during the first year of the Eisenhower administration. In the end, such a move was rejected: it was too risky and potentially illegal as an aggressive war, especially when unleashed by a country still recalling the surprise Japanese attack of December 7, 1941.

Preventive war against China, the rising and revolutionary power of the 1960s, was also discussed. President John Kennedy mused about preventing China from becoming a nuclear power, but as it approached an operational capability, it was the Soviet Union that came to fear the prospect of a nuclear China the most. In 1969, Moscow went so far as to hint that it was planning a strike against Chinese nuclear assets, to the point where the United States felt obliged to make it known that it could not support such a move.

It was preemptive war, however, that was most prominent in Cold War strategic thinking. The reason was simple. The only apparent way to win a nuclear war was to eliminate the enemy's nuclear capability before it could be used. Past theories of strategic airpower provided the conceptual framework. Attempts to knock out enemy airpower were known as blunting missions, tried unsuccessfully by Germany in 1940 and achieved spectacularly by Israel in the June 1967 war against Egypt. The trouble with applying this model to the eradication of an adversary's nuclear weapons was that, if attacks failed to destroy all targeted assets and a few survived, they could be launched in retaliation with catastrophic consequences. Nuclear arsenals became so big, and the needed proportions to inflict terrible damage so

slight, that preemption simply risked bringing about the very war that it was supposed to prevent.

Policymakers attempted to address this challenge with the concepts of first- and second-strike capabilities. A first-strike capability was intended to disarm the enemy in a surprise, preemptive attack by destroying as much of its means of retaliation as possible on the ground and intercepting any of its bombers or missiles that might have escaped before the attack was executed. If a target country were able to absorb that first strike and still maintain the capability to retaliate with enough nuclear force to overwhelm any existing enemy defenses, it was said to possess a second-strike capability.

Preemption, in theory, risks bringing about the very war it was supposed to prevent.

In the Cold War, deterrence was arguably effective because both the United States and the Soviet Union acquired nuclear systems that could withstand attacks or remain hidden, while the planned missile defense always seemed too porous to reduce significantly the other side's second-strike capability. In all the relevant calculations, the awesome power of individual weapons just left too little of a margin for error to contemplate preemption. Under such circumstances, mutually assured destruction was a concept used to describe a terrible reality. It was considered a strategy only because there was no way found around it. Various targeting strategies may have reduced the probability of retaliation, but they could never diminish it to zero and therefore remained at best under certain dire circumstances a theoretical alternative to immediate Armageddon.

Until mutually assured destruction was acknowledged in the mid-1960s, a far greater worry was that of two opposing first-strike capabilities. Such a condition, it was feared, would put a premium on striking first, encouraging preemption at the slightest provocation lest one lose its weapons and suffer annihilation. Mutually assured destruction, by contrast, turned out to be remarkably stable, provided many good reasons not to risk direct military conflict, and enabled the political conflict of the Cold War to be decided by the collapse of one of the two competing ideological systems.

Addressing Threats in the 1990s

This interpretation of the Cold War is reflected in the 2002 U.S. NSS. It depicts a status quo, risk-averse Cold War adversary as the threat around which national strategy was largely shaped. Yet, at the time, including the early years of the Reagan administration—with numerous officials on the

same wave of the political spectrum as current administration officials—talk of an "evil empire" was as prevalent as that of the "axis of evil" today, while deterrence through mutually assured destruction was derided as both immoral and incredible. Its flaws were the main rationale behind President Ronald Reagan's Strategic Defense Initiative to produce nationwide protection against missile attack. It should also be recalled that NATO countries regularly presented the conventional might of the Warsaw Pact as so superior to their own that every effort was made to think of nuclear weapons as more than just weapons of last resort. Although deterrence was elevated into an all-purpose and largely successful doctrine throughout the Cold War years, the exceptions described here convey that confidence in it was never total, especially—but by no means only—among those largely promoting preemption now.

The concept of imminence needs to be reconsidered.

The widespread celebration of the quality of deterrence strategies in retrospect is perhaps most pertinent today for how it illuminates precisely those conditions that no longer exist. Now, instead of symmetrical conflicts, it is asymmetrical ones that haunt policymakers. With great powers less inclined to threaten each other, threats are more likely to come from far weaker powers, which might be inclined to use unconventional means to compensate for their inferior conventional military capabilities. Although asymmetrical conflict was an issue during the Cold War, particularly in Vietnam as regular forces had to cope with guerrilla warfare, its influence was always governed by the bigger picture—a great-power confrontation based on quite a remarkable symmetry: two superpowers, two alliances, two nuclear arsenals. The concept of escalation enabled one side to threaten to shift a conflict from one level (a weapons class or a subregion), where asymmetries favored the side bold enough to initiate it, to another level that might favor the side initially attacked. Nonetheless, the process and thus the de-escalatory pressure for restraint was presumed to be governed by the ultimate symmetry of massive nuclear exchanges.

The Cold War symmetry called for a focus on contingencies that carried enormous risks for both sides. An unwillingness to confront the ideological challenge presented by communism could result in the transformation of the political life and socioeconomic organization of whole continents; a false step in the other direction and civilization itself might be swept away. Not surprisingly, the corresponding conceptual framework that emerged out of academic and policy debates was geared toward steering a middle course between these two potential catastrophes. A conflict that could not be securely resolved either through diplomacy or war required strategies that

demonstrated determination but were at the same time infused with caution and restraint: containment, deterrence, stability, crisis management, détente, and arms control. The preferred alternative to escalation was to seek symmetry to avoid fighting, represented by the strategic paraphernalia of hot lines, confidence-building measures, and summits. Such strategies were reinforced by principles of international law, which stressed noninterference in internal affairs and military action strictly for the purpose of self-defense. More radical notions—from appeasement and disarmament on the one hand to rollbacks and arms races on the other—appeared reckless.

With the dissolution of the Soviet Union, asymmetries in raw military power were obvious but were also apparent in political concerns. Western nations, at least, seemed to have few vital interests at stake in the many conflicts that still raged around the world. Their interests lay more fundamentally in establishing and enforcing rules for a more civilized international system, including general respect for minorities and liberal economic practices. Well before the end of the Cold War, a series of tensions and conflicts—only loosely related to the superpower confrontation in Africa, Asia, and the Middle East that occasionally erupted violently and viciously—increasingly began to develop dynamics all their own. Whether or not to intervene in particular conflicts—in Somalia but not in Rwanda, tentatively in Bosnia but assertively in Kosovo—was a matter of choice for those few powers with an expeditionary capability, mainly the United States, the United Kingdom, and France. Unlike those nations directly involved, which naturally had no choice, in every one of these conflicts the intervening powers were only willing to apply a small portion of their available resources and were wary of enduring excessive human costs for these more limited interests.

The strategic language required to describe and analyze such new situations has only developed slowly. Because contemporary conflicts often involved actual combat, some traditional concepts (e.g., attrition, maneuver, interdiction) were resurrected, but because such terms tended to relate to the application of airpower or the movement of armies, they were tactical, not strategic. The concept of prevention, usually in the form of "conflict prevention," had a place during this period, but more in a diplomatic than a military sense. In certain instances, such conflict prevention could even be considered preemptive, such as the ultimatum against Serbia in a belated effort to prevent the persecution of the local Albanians. By and large, however, the great powers got involved when fighting was already underway, humanitarian catastrophes loomed, or neighboring countries risked getting dragged in. Few of these conflicts even started with a classic military offensive but instead emerged out of intercommunal violence.

The language has been most prominently and controversially used, however, in the context of another asymmetric challenge, posed by radical pow-

ers threatening to gain artificial strength through WMD. Iraq, Iran, and North Korea have long been on the list, while China was occasionally presented as an ascendant great power. Unlike discretionary intervention in civil conflicts in remote parts of the developing world, paying attention to WMD proliferation among radical powers did not seem to be a matter of choice. The total nature of the threat made the framework and vocabulary of the past seem appropriate. Although counterproliferation policy under the Clinton administration suggested preemption at times, public emphasis remained on deterring rather than eliminating the rogues so that, for example, policy toward Iraq and Iran was described as "dual containment."

Neither agenda—addressing intercommunal conflicts nor possible rogue proliferation—called for placing a strategy of preemption at the heart of a new U.S. strategic doctrine. Precisely because of their military superiority, the United States and its allies did not need to take military initiative to secure victory. Instead, military operations were geared toward containing conflicts, mitigating their effects, coercing guilty parties, and establishing law and order.

Defending Prevention

After September 11, an effective U.S. national security strategy became more urgent. Although both the source of the threat and the means of delivery employed were novel, that day's tragic events reinforced long-established U.S. fears of surprise attacks in the form of a bolt from the skies. This fear is the product of geography and history, of Pearl Harbor and the years when the Soviet Union appeared to be forging ahead with intercontinental missile deployments. Other states tend to worry more about land invasions.

If September 11 was a preemptive attack against the United States, it was hardly decisive, and it was possible to deal with the perpetrators in an effort to ensure that such a blow would never be struck again. The United States suddenly found itself in a war that highlighted the two existing asymmetric challenges and their potential intersection. Although a hyperpower without a military peer among states, the United States proved unexpectedly vulnerable to a murky underworld of gangsters and terrorists who might acquire devastating instruments, either by complicity from rogue states or by capitalizing on the anarchy of weak states.

So, as stated in the U.S. NSS, the greatest change in international security since September 11 has been the "nature and motivations of these new adversaries, their determination to obtain destructive powers hitherto available only to the world's strongest states, and the greater likelihood that they will use weapons of mass destruction against [the United States]." In-

stead of a status quo, risk-averse adversary against whom deterrence might work, the United States now has gamblers for enemies, many of whom embrace martyrdom and prefer weapons of mass destruction—weapons that can be easily concealed, delivered covertly, and used without warning—perhaps to compensate for vast U.S. conventional superiority but also because "wanton destruction and the targeting of innocents" has become an end in itself.

In the strategy document, these two types of threat were combined as a sort of composite enemy, combining the worst features of Saddam Hussein and Osama bin Laden. Saddam, for example, has (at least for the moment) a state, no hint of any personal interest in martyrdom, and a calculating nature, in addition to extreme ruthlessness and an undoubted fascination with all types of destructive instruments. As there is no evidence that the two have yet come together, an argument for action before they do is preventive rather than preemptive. The desire to thwart the emergence of such a hybrid enemy helps to explain the argument, found in the NSS, that the concept of imminence, upon which the grounds for preemption are based, needs to be reconsidered. Recognizing that prevention is at issue here—not preemption—is key.

> 'Prevention is better than cure' is as good a motto for foreign policy as it is for medicine.

Preemption as a strategic concept has been introduced in connection with the dangers posed by WMD. Events over the last few months, however, indicate the concept's limited value even in this context. No preemptive action has yet been suggested against North Korea, while the preventive case against Iraq has come to be based, for sound legal and political reasons, on its noncompliance with United Nations resolutions. What either of these states might do in the future is a matter of anxious speculation; but no aggressive action on either of their parts has been shown to be imminent, and to the extent that they have contemplated taking such action, it is difficult to say that existing policies of deterrence and containment have proven entirely inadequate. If the United States attacks facilities and overthrows regimes before these dangers have had a chance to emerge, such action will be described as preemption because that is the language currently in vogue, but this language would be incorrect. The relevant concept here is prevention.

The national security strategy suggests that preemption can be considered not only in terms of military strikes but also in the softer fields of sharper intelligence work; diplomatic attention; and judicious applications of economic assistance, technical advice, and military/police support. As a prudent and effective approach to the war on terror, this makes sense, as it

provides sound guidance for dealing with the security problems within and arising from weak states. But again, prevention is the more applicable term in this context rather than preemption—acting early rather than late, while a problem gestates but before it erupts, using all available means. There will, of course, be instances in which a terrorist attack is imminent and a quick, preemptive strike will be appropriate, but deterrence is not necessarily impossible under such circumstances—public warnings about imminent attacks alone have often been used in an attempt to ward off those planning them, and action is more likely to be taken by the police than the armed forces. In cases where traditional preemptive strikes might be justified, the old tests will still apply—making sure that action heads off danger rather than aggravates or instigates it.

Cases where preemption can happen today are likely to be few and far between.

The new, dynamic, and unsettled international environment has exposed the limits of a conceptual framework derived from a period in which international politics was dominated by great-power rivalries and international law gave overriding respect to the rights of states, no matter how brutal their internal policies. It is not surprising that the United States and its allies see no reason to wait for problems to develop and wish to tackle them before they reach a critical stage. So long as one is sure of the diagnosis (no small test in and of itself), "an ounce of prevention is better than a pound of cure" is as good a motto for foreign policy as it is for medicine. Under contemporary conditions, this requires paying close attention to what is transpiring in the disadvantaged and disaffected parts of the international system and considering the full range of policy instruments.

When responding to a situation involves the use of force, it can challenge traditional notions of international law, but the greater challenge is likely to be the traditional habits of great powers. The enthusiasm for preemption reflects a yearning for a world in which problems can be eliminated by bold, timely, and decisive strokes. Cases where this can happen today are likely to be few and far between. An updated notion of prevention, by contrast, might encourage recognition that the world in which we live is one in which the best results are likely to come from a readiness to engage difficult problems over an extended period of time.

Note

1. White House, *The National Security Strategy of the United States of America* (Washington, D.C.: U.S. Government Printing Office, September 2002).