The Preventive War that Never Happened: Britain, France, and the Rise of Germany in the 1930s

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The theory of "preventive war" states that, under certain conditions, states respond to rising adversaries with military force in an attempt to forestall an adverse shift in the balance of power. British and French passivity in response to the rapid rise of Germany in the 1930s would appear to constitute one of the leading empirical anomalies in the theory, one the theory's proponents must explain. After clarifying the meaning of the preventive motivation for war and specifying the conditions under which it should be the strongest, we examine French and British behavior in the crises over the Rhineland in 1936 and Sudeten Czechoslovakia in 1938 through an intensive study of government documents and private papers. We argue that French political leaders, anticipating a continuing adverse shift in relative power, wanted to confront Hitler, but only with British support, which was not forthcoming. British leaders believed, even by 1936, that the balance of power had already shifted in Germany's favor, but that German ascendancy was only temporary and that British rearmament would redress the balance of power in a few years. We contrast our argument with alternative interpretations based on domestic political pressures and ideologically driven beliefs and interests.

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The central role of "preemption" in the U.S. National Security Strategy of 2002 and in the Bush administration's initial justification of war in Iraq stimulated renewed interest in the theory and practice of "preventive war." The core argument of the "theory" of preventive war is that under certain conditions states respond to rising adversaries with military force in an attempt to forestall an adverse shift in the balance of power.[1] As Robert Gilpin argues, shifting power balances are a persistent feature of international politics, and the "most attractive response" to relative decline is often a "preventive war" that "destroys or weakens the rising challenger while the military advantage is still with the declining power."[2] If this argument is correct, we should have expected to see an Anglo-French war against Germany in the 1930s, when it took less than a decade for Germany to rise from a position of relative weakness to become the dominant military power on the European continent. The absence of a military response to Hitler's Germany has come to be regarded as the paradigmatic case of inaction in response to a rising threat and thus the leading empirical anomaly in the theory of preventive war, made all the more salient by the symbol of Munich and the horrors of World War II.

Our primary aim in this paper is to explain this apparent anomaly and to explore the implications of this potentially damaging case for the theory of preventive war. In the process, we offer a parsimonious new interpretation of the British and French policies of appeasement. We argue that basic realist propositions are sufficient to explain British and French inaction in the crises of 1936 and 1938, and we defend that interpretation against the leading alternatives. This interpretation has important implications for other theories as well, including balance of power theory and its key proposition that great powers nearly always balance against potential hegemonic threats by forming alliances or building up armaments.[3] Our study is important for policy as well as for theory. The "lessons of Munich," and of the 1930s more generally, have served as a defining learning experience for subsequent generations of policy makers and the public. Those lessons have shaped American foreign policy from the Korean War to the 2003 Iraq War, so it is critical that we get the story right.[4]

Our analysis also makes an important methodological point. A great deal of research in political science, particularly case study research, focuses on the puzzle of why theoretically unexpected events occur, in the hope that

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[1] We use the term "theory" loosely. The literature on preventive war consists of a number of hypotheses that have yet to be integrated into a coherent theory.

[2] Robert Gilpin, *War and Change in World Politics* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1981), 191.

[3] For an argument that the counterhegemonic balancing hypothesis is shared by all versions of balance of power theory, see Jack S. Levy, "Balances and Balancing: Concepts, Propositions, and Research Design," in *Realism and the Balancing of Power: A New Debate*, ed. John A. Vasquez and Colin Elman (Upper Saddle River, NJ: Prentice-Hall, 2003), 128–53. See also Michael W. Doyle, *Ways of War and Peace* (New York: Norton, 1997), 163.

[4] Yuen Foong Khong, *Analogies at War* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1992).

explaining these puzzles will facilitate the continual refinement of theory. In terms of the logic of inquiry, however, explaining why theoretically expected events do not occur is just as important for theory development as explaining why theoretically unexpected events do occur.[5]

PREVENTIVE WAR IN HISTORY AND THEORY

As Paul Schroeder argues, preventive war is a "common tool of statecraft," though exactly how common depends on exactly how one defines the concept.[6] The logic of prevention underlies Thucydides' argument that the Peloponnesian War was caused by "the growth of the power of Athens and the alarm which this inspired in Sparta," which "made war inevitable."[7] The German decision for war in 1914 is often traced to the rising power of Russia and the fear that by 1917 Germany could no longer be assured of victory in a two-front war in Europe.[8] The Israeli strike against the Iraqi nuclear reactor in 1981 is often regarded as the paradigmatic case of preventive action.[9]

These and many other examples have led some historians to make broad claims about the role of preventive logic in the processes leading to war.[10] A.J.P. Taylor argued that "[e]very war between Great Powers [in the 1848–1918 period] started as a preventive war, not a war of conquest." Michael Howard maintains that the causes of most wars can be found in "perceptions by statesmen of the growth of hostile power and the fears for the restriction, if not the extinction, of their own."[11] International relations theorists make equally sweeping statements. Stephen Van Evera argues that opening and closing windows of opportunity and vulnerability generate strong incentives for prevention, and constitute one of the leading causes of war. Dale

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[5] Paul W. Schroeder makes a similar point in *Systems, Stability, and Statecraft: Essays on The International History of Modern Europe*, ed. David Wetzel, Robert Jervis, and Jack S. Levy (New York: Palgrave, 2004), 121.

[6] Ibid., 139.

[7] Thucydides, "History of the Peloponnesian War," bk. 1, sec. 23, in *The Landmark Thucydides: A Comprehensive Guide to the Peloponnesian War*, ed. Robert B. Strassler (New York: Free Press, 1996), 16.

[8] Fritz Fischer, *Germany's Aims in the First World War* (New York: W.W. Norton, 1967); Jack S. Levy, "Preferences, Constraints, and Choices in July 1914," *International Security* 15, no. 3 (Winter 1990/91): 151–86; Stephen Van Evera, *Causes of War: Power and the Roots of Conflict* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1999); Dale C. Copeland, *The Origins of Major War* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2000). For different perspectives, see Marc Trachtenberg, "The Meaning of Mobilization in 1914," *International Security* 15, no. 3 (Winter 1990/91): 120–50; Norrin M. Ripsman and Jean-Marc F. Blanchard, "Commercial Liberalism Under Fire: Evidence from 1914 and 1936," *Security Studies* 6, no. 2 (Winter 1996/97): 4–50.

[9] Shlomo Nakdimon, *First Strike*, trans. Peretz Kidron (New York: Summit Books, 1987); Jack S. Levy and Joseph R. Gochal, "When Do Democracies Fight Preventive Wars?" (paper, Joint Conference of the International Studies Association and the Central and East European International Studies Association, Budapest, Hungary, 26–28 June 2003.

[10] For additional examples, see Alfred Vagts, *Defense and Diplomacy* (New York: King's Crown, 1956); Van Evera, *Causes of War*.

[11] A.J.P. Taylor, *The Struggle for Mastery in Europe, 1848–1918* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1954), 166; Michael Howard, *The Causes of Wars* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1983), 18.

Copeland argues that most major wars can be traced to "dynamic power differentials," in which preventive logic is central.[12] Preventive logic is a possible intervening causal mechanism between power shifts and war in other theories as well, including power transition theory and long-cycle theory, and it is closely tied to the "commitment problem" in the "bargaining model of war."[13]

Although we can identify numerous cases of wars driven by shifting power and preventive logic, it is also clear that states do not always respond to a rising adversary with military force. Britain responded to the rising power of the United States at the end of the nineteenth century with a conciliatory strategy to manage the impending power transition, rather than with military force in an attempt to prevent one. Faced with the rise of German military potential and power in the 1930s, France and Britain pursued a policy of appeasement rather than preventive war or balancing.[14] This leads to the question of when states respond to rising challengers with military force and when they respond with some other strategy.

Before we turn to this question, we need to deal with the enormous ambiguity surrounding the concept of preventive war. We then develop a set of hypotheses on the conditions under which states facing rising adversaries are most likely to respond with military force. After emphasizing the theoretical importance of the 1930s case, we turn to an in-depth historical analysis of the British and French decisions not to respond to the rise of Germany with military force in the mid-to-late 1930s.

CONCEPTUAL CLARIFICATION

The assertion that preventive wars are commonplace is sensitive to precisely how the term is defined.[15] The broader the definition of preventive war, the

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[12] Van Evera, *Causes of War*; Copeland, *Origins of Major War*.

[13] Jacek Kugler and Douglas Lemke, eds., *Parity and War* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1996); Karen A. Rasler and William R. Thompson, *The Great Powers and Global Struggle, 1490–1990* (Lexington: The University Press of Kentucky, 1994); James D. Fearon, "Rationalist Explanations for War," *International Organization* 49, no. 3 (Summer 1995): 379–414. Under conditions of shifting power, the declining state hesitates to accept concessions in return for peace, knowing that the rising adversary will have the power to regain any concessions later, and the rising state cannot credibly commit not to exploit its increased strength in the future.

[14] Preventive war and appeasement are the two extreme ends of a range of strategies that a state might adopt in response to its perception of a rising adversary. In between are arms buildups, alliance formation, deterrent threats, economic coercion, and other strategies often associated with balancing behavior. These strategies are often used in combination. Randall L. Schweller, *Unanswered Threats: Political Constraints on the Balance of Power* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2006).

[15] This section builds on Jack S. Levy, "Declining Power and the Preventive Motivation for War," *World Politics* 40, no. 1 (October 1987): 82–107. For a more detailed conceptual treatment of prevention, see Jack S. Levy, "Preventive War and the Bush Doctrine: Theoretical Logic and Historical Roots," in Stanley A. Renshon and Peter Suedfeld, eds., *The Bush Doctrine: Psychology and Strategy in an Age of Terrorism* (London: Routledge, 2007), 175–200.

more frequently it occurs. In the extreme case, nearly all wars are preventive in the sense that most wars are designed to prevent something worse from happening. Such definitions subsume too much under a single conceptual umbrella and provide very little analytic leverage for discriminating among different causal paths to war. Scholars can debate whether Taylor is right to say that all wars between 1848 and 1918 were not wars of conquest, but it is probably not useful to say that all of those wars were preventive. If prevention is defined as anticipatory action in response to any future threat, or even a serious threat, then what John Lewis Gaddis calls a "succession of preemptive interventions" by the United States in Central America during the last century are put in the same category as the Israeli attack against the Iraqi nuclear reactor in 1981.[16] Each may have been driven by fears of the future, but they are different enough that we need different concepts to categorize them.

These concerns lead us to focus on the perception of threat deriving from changing power differentials and on a military response to the threat. Preventive logic is driven by the perception of a rising adversary, the fear of the consequences of an adverse shift in power, and by the temptation to use military force to block or retard the adversary's further growth while the opportunity is still available.[17]

It is analytically important to note that our key concept is preventive logic or the preventive motivation for war, which is a causal variable that intervenes between power shifts and war. Although historians and political scientists have long used the term "preventive war," the concept is problematic because it essentially defines a particular type of war in terms of its causes and thus confounds cause and effect in single concept. Our formulation facilitates the task of evaluating the importance of the preventive motivation relative to that of other causal variables in the processes leading to war.[18]

Another source of confusion, by scholars as well as policy makers, is the tendency to confuse prevention with preemption, which is another source of better-now-than-later logic.[19] Each involves a military strike, but the perceived threats and the motivations are different. The threat leading to

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[16] John Lewis Gaddis, *Surprise, Security, and the American Experience* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard Univeristy Press, 2004). Gaddis uses prevention and preemption interchangeably. Renshon defines prevention as an action "to forestall a grave national security threat." Jonathan Renshon, *Why Leaders Choose War: The Psychology of Prevention* (Westport: Praeger Security International, 2006), 4.

[17] Thus the preventive motivation for war, defined here, excludes preventive interventions designed to avert humanitarian disasters. It also excludes actions to avert a loss of prestige (included by Renshon, *Why Leaders Choose War*). Although prestige can reinforce power, it is still useful analytically to separate the effects of reputation and material capabilities, particularly in light of research suggesting that states are driven more by perceptions of relative capabilities than by adversary credibility in responding to threats. See Daryl G. Press, *Calculating Credibility: How Leaders Assess Military Threats* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2005). In excluding these other factors from the category of prevention, we do not necessarily argue that they have less causal impact on outcomes than do negative power shifts. That is an empirical question, and one best answered by first analytically distinguishing the causal variables.

[18] Levy, "Declining Power."

[19] Ibid.; Van Evera, *Causes of War*, chaps. 3–4.

preemption is an imminent attack by an adversary, and the aim of the pre-emptor is to secure a first-mover advantage. The threat leading to prevention is not an immediate attack, but instead a rising adversary and the fear of the consequences of an adverse power shift. Those consequences include not only the risk of a war later under less favorable terms but also the erosion of a state's bargaining power. The preventer's motivation is to eliminate or retard the growing threat by destroying or reducing the adversary's military power.[20]

Although the preventive motivation for war is often linked to "power transitions" involving a reversal of power relationships, it may also arise in response to power shifts that fall short of complete power transitions, such as "rapid approaches."[21] The threat that drives preventive logic is not only that the rising state will surpass the leader and initiate a war once it is stronger, but also that a shift in power, even if partial, will lead inevitably to an erosion of the declining state's bargaining leverage.

Although we have focused on dyadic power shifts, perceptions and calculations involving third states can also be important. It makes a difference whether a rising challenger or a declining leader is expected to be diplomatically isolated or have allies in their present and future confrontations. German decision makers in 1914 never doubted their ability to defeat their rising Russian adversary in a bilateral war, but they feared the implications of Russia's rise for Germany's ability to defeat Russia and France together in a two-front war by 1917.

Although the commitment problem limits the extent of prewar bargaining between preventer and target, analyses of prevention need to give more attention to strategic interaction between states. Whether a military response to an adverse shift in power takes the form of a limited preventive strike or an all-out war depends not only on the decisions of the initiator but also on the response by the target. Presumably the initiator anticipates the target's likely response; and depending on the context, it is more likely to initiate a preventive strike if it expects no military response (Israel against Iraq in 1981) and to refrain from a preventive strike if it expects a major military response (United States against North Korea in 1994).

A final question is whether the focus should be on objective measures of power or on actors' perceptions of power. The former may be appropriate for some theoretical tasks, particularly when the empirical investigation is based on a large-N research design.[22] Given our definition of the preventive

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[20] The Israeli strike against the Iraqi nuclear reactor in 1981 was preventive; the Israeli initiation of the 1967 war is widely regarded as preemptive. Michael Oren, *Six Days of War: June 1967 and the Making of the Modern Middle East* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2002). Although the second Bush administration used the concept of preemption to rationalize its 2003 war against Iraq, its emphasis on denying Saddam weapons of mass destruction was more consistent with the logic of prevention.

[21] Frank Whelon Wayman, "Power Shifts and the Onset of War," in *Parity and War*, 145–62.

[22] Most empirical studies of power transition theory utilize large-N research designs. See Kugler and Lemke, *Parity and War*. One that explicitly examines the mechanism of prevention is Douglas Lemke,

motivation in terms of a declining state's perceptions and expectations about the future, we prefer to focus on leaders' subjective perceptions of relative decline. Rather than theoretically specifying the important indicators of power, we empirically investigate how political and military actors defined the most salient dimensions of power and whether they perceived the balance to be shifting in these dimensions of power. In the case study that follows, therefore, we focus on British and French perceptions of trends in power and on their expectations regarding when they would be overtaken by Germany, not on any objective point of power transition. We ignore, for now, the contentious debate among historians as to when Germany actually overtook France and Britain, and whether the Western powers could have won a war in 1936 or 1938.[23]

CONDITIONS FOR "PREVENTIVE WAR"

Under what conditions are states most likely to respond to adverse power shifts with military force? When is the preventive motivation for war the strongest? We have no single theory of prevention, but scholars have advanced a number of discrete hypotheses that we can incorporate into a broader theoretical framework.[24] We can make a good first approximation of

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"Investigating the Preventive Motive for War," *International Interactions* 29 (October–December 2003): 273–92.

[23] To summarize briefly, some historians argue that the point of transition came after Munich and that France would have been better off going to war with Germany in 1938 than in waiting until 1939–40. Anthony Adamthwaite, for example, concludes that September 1938 provided France with its "last chance of fighting Germany on better or at least even terms." Anthony Adamthwaite, *The Making of the Second World War* (London: George, Allen & Unwin, 1977), 81. Williamson Murray makes a similar argument in *The Change in the European Balance of Power, 1938–1939: The Path to Ruin* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1984), as does Ernest R. May in *Strange Victory: Hitler's Conquest of France* (New York: Hill and Wang, 2000). Others disagree, arguing that the *Anschluss* of Germany and Austria irrevocably altered the balance in Germany's favor even before the Czechoslovak crisis. Jean-Baptiste Duroselle, *France and the Nazi Threat: The Collapse of French Diplomacy, 1932–1939* (New York: Enigma Books, 2004), 268. Still others identify the turning point with the Rhineland remilitarization (March 1936) and subsequent fortification. Young argues that by 1936 "[t]he German army was certainly the qualitative equivalent of the French, and the German air force had secured a comfortable margin of superiority." Young, *France and the Origins of the Second World War*, 28. Stephen Schuker disagrees and argues that the German military had already surpassed that of France by March 1936. Schuker, "France and the Remilitarization of the Rhineland," 304. Randall L. Schweller shares this view, and uses the Correlates of War project's aggregate data on military capabilities, economic capacity, and population to argue that German power surpassed both Great Britain and France individually by 1934 and continued to expand on that advantage each year thereafter. Randall L. Schweller, *Deadly Imbalances: Tripolarity and Hitler's Strategy of World Conquest* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1998), 28–31. We believe that the views of Schuker and Schweller most closely approximate British and French leaders' perceptions of the balance of power. We argue that French and particularly British leaders believed that Germany had surpassed France and Britain in combined strength with the announcement of conscription in 1935 and Hitler's unveiling of a 300,000 man army, together with the large air force Germany had assembled before the Rhineland or Czech crises occurred. The accuracy of these perceptions is a different question.

[24] Copeland presents a well-integrated theory of power shifts and responses in *Origins of Major Wars*.

the strength of the preventive motivation for war on the basis of a rationalist cost-benefit framework in which a state anticipating an adverse power shift compares the expected utility of initiating or provoking war now with the expected utility of inaction, including the costs and risks of delay. Let us start with the expected utility of delay, because it is the fear of the future that drives the preventive motivation.

First, the greater the anticipated magnitude of the shift in military power, the greater the costs of delay and thus the greater the incentives for war now. Power transitions are more likely to lead to war than are more limited power shifts, and the greater the future advantage of the rising state, the greater the likelihood of war now. The logic is that the greater the expected advantage of the adversary, the greater the probability of an adversary victory in any future war, the greater the margin of its advantage and the lower its costs in such a war, and therefore the lower the expected value of that war to the declining state. Consequently, the declining state has a greater decrease in bargaining power, and it would have to make greater concessions to avoid war or other undesirable outcomes. The result is a greater incentive for preventive action in an attempt to impede the rise of the adversary.[25] That incentive may be reduced, however, if the declining state expects that war would only temporarily impede its adversary's rise.

The rise in power may not be linear or monotonic. The declining state's incentives for preventive military action are diminished if the declining state anticipates that its period of disadvantage will be temporary, that it will soon regain an advantage, and that its adversary will not exploit its temporary window of opportunity.[26] Sometimes, however, the state with the temporary advantage will exploit its closing window of opportunity, as illustrated by Iraq's attack against Iran in 1980 during Iran's period of weakness following its revolution.

Another factor that increases the costs of delay, and hence the incentives for preventive action, is the rate at which the power differential is perceived to be shifting. Whereas the adversary's ultimate power potential is distant in time and difficult to predict, its rate of growth is readily observable and therefore more threatening. Perceptions of a rapid shift in power increase the declining state's expectation that it will be overtaken. Rapid transitions also induce a tendency to exaggerate fears of these trends.[27] They also reduce the declining state's time to increase its own power, gain allies, seek an accommodation with its rival, or otherwise adjust to the changing distribution of power, which increases the preventive motivation for war.

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[25] Organski, *World Politics*, 334–37; William R. Thompson, "Succession Crises in the Global Political System: A Test of the Transition Model," in *Crises in the World System*, ed. Albert L. Bergesen (Beverly Hills: Sage, 1983), 96.

[26] Van Evera, *Causes of War*.

[27] This argument departs from a purely rationalist calculus.

The declining state's expectations about the adversary's future intentions are also important. Preventive action is more likely if the declining state believes that the adversary will try to exploit its stronger position by going to war or using the threat of war to extract significant concessions. Factors increasing expectations of future hostility include current hostility and a record of past hostility. Power shifts within a long-term rivalry, for example, are more likely to lead to preventive action than are power shifts between non-rivals.[28] The probability of war happening now is significantly increased by the belief that a future war is highly probable or inevitable because of strategic logic and its domestic impact: internal opponents of war are deprived of the potentially powerful argument that by avoiding the use of military force, the state can avoid war. Although few if any wars are objectively inevitable, psychological factors often induce people to interpret a high probability outcome as certain, and it is striking how frequently perceptions of the inevitability of war appear in the documentary record.[29]

While the expected costs of delay can be a powerful motivation for preventive military action, fighting a war now involves costs and risks that might inhibit military action by the declining state. The more uncertain the likelihood of victory and the greater the expected costs of war now, the weaker the preventive motivation for war. For this reason, weaker states are rarely driven by the preventive motivation to initiate war against stronger states that are growing further in strength, unless the weaker state anticipates that its position will erode even further and that this is the last opportunity for war, however risky it might be.[30]

Although the dyadic balance of power is the primary determinant of the expected probability of victory and its costs, other factors may also be important. A technology that allows a weaker state to inflict enormous costs on the stronger state, in the course of a losing war effort, reduces the probability that the declining state will resort to military force. Nuclear weapons are an obvious example, but as we argue below, British leaders' fears of German conventional air attacks on British cities was an important deterrent to war against a rapidly rising Germany in 1938.[31] In addition, expectations regarding the possible intervention of other states, particularly great powers, may be critical. If a declining state has allies that are willing to fight, or if it

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[28] On international rivalries, see William R. Thompson, ed., *Great Power Rivalries* (Columbia: University of South Carolina Press, 1999); Paul F. Diehl and Gary Goertz, *War and Peace in International Rivalry* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2000).

[29] Richard Ned Lebow, *Between Peace and War* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1981), 254–63; Robert Jervis, *The Meaning of the Nuclear Revolution* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1989), 153–64.

[30] An example might be Japan's attack against the United States in 1941. Akira Iriye, *The Origins of the Second World War in Asia and the Pacific* (New York: Longman, 1987), 174; Van Evera, *Causes of War*, 89–94.

[31] Gerald Lee, "'I See Dead People': Air-raid Phobia and Britain's Behavior in the Munich Crisis," *Security Studies* 13, no. 2 (Winter 2003/04), 230–72.

believes that the rising adversary is diplomatically isolated, the incentives for prevention increase.[32]

Another factor that interacts with the dyadic military balance to affect the outcome of the war, and hence incentives for prevention, is the offensive/defensive balance, or at least perceptions thereof.[33] Scholars have offered several lines of argument. In a dyadic context, the greater the offensive advantage, the greater the potential advantage for a preventer who chooses to strike first and the stronger the preventive motivation. If the offensive advantage is expected to persist into the future period of the adversary's superiority, this is particularly compelling as it would increase the seriousness of the future threat.[34]

The offense/defense balance also influences the extent to which states will support their allies against growing external threats, raising the likelihood of a military response to rising powers. Thomas Christensen and Jack Snyder, recognizing the potential for free riding in a multipolar system, argue that states are likely to form tight alliances and respond quickly against aggressors if political and military leaders believe that the offense has the advantage. They are likely, however, to try to pass the costs of opposing challengers onto other actors rather than to commit themselves to a defensive alliance if they believe that the advantage lies with the defense.[35] Christensen modifies this hypothesis in a subsequent work by incorporating perceptions of the relative balance of power. These perceptions interact with the offense/defense balance to determine the ability of the frontline state to resist a challenger in the early stages of a war. Second-line states form tight alliances and respond quickly to aggression if the frontline state is equal or inferior to the potential challenger and if the advantage lies with the offense; they avoid prewar commitments if they perceive that the frontline state is stronger than the potential challenger; and they form weak pre-war alliances but then avoid early intervention if they believe that a defensive advantage will allow a relatively weak ally to hold up in the early stages of an attritional war.[36]

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[32] Most preventive wars are undertaken by a single leading state, in part because potential allies have incentives to free ride. See Vagts, "Defense and Diplomacy," 290.

[33] Scholars offer multiple definitions of this ambiguous concept, but one we find useful for land warfare is the degree of superiority needed by the attacker to overcome a defender, which is a function of both technology and doctrine. Jack S. Levy, "The Offensive/Defensive Balance of Military Technology and the Incidence of War," *International Studies Quarterly* 28, no. 2 (June 1984): 219–38. For variations of offense/defense theory, see Michael Brown and Owen R. Cote, eds., *Offense, Defense, and War* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2004). For applications to prevention, see Van Evera, *Causes of* War, chap 4.

[34] Levy, "Declining Power"; Van Evera, *Causes of War*, chap. 4.

[35] Thomas J. Christensen and Jack Snyder, "Chain Gangs and Passed Bucks: Predicting Alliance Patterns in Multipolarity." *International Organization* 44, no. 2 (Spring 1990): 137–69. The authors do not directly address the problem of "preventive war," but their argument is directly applicable. Offensive realists like Mearsheimer give less weight to the offense/defense distinction and predict more buck-passing and less balancing. John Mearsheimer, *The Tragedy of Great Power Politics* (New York: Norton, 2001).

[36] Thomas J. Christensen, "Perceptions and Alliances in Europe, 1865–1940," *International Organization* 51, no. 1 (Winter 1997): 65–97.

Although cost-benefit calculations based on external threats and opportunities to a rational and unitary state actor provide a good approximation of the strength of the preventive motivation for war, other factors may also be relevant. Among the most important are policy makers' orientations toward risk and uncertainty, domestic politics, the policy preferences and political influence of the military, and misperceptions. Each of these factors may influence war directly. Here we are interested in their interaction effects with anticipation of an adverse power shift and fears of the future.

A decision for war in response to decline involves enormous risks and uncertainties, including current risks surrounding a war now and future risks associated with delay. The former involve the inability to predict precisely the probability of victory in a war or its likely costs, including the risk that the war will expand to include additional states. The latter involve uncertainties regarding whether, and how far, one's power position will continue to decline; the adversary's intentions once it achieves superiority; one's ability to secure diplomatic support or to appease the adversary successfully; and the likely costs of war in the worst case. It is not at all clear which set of risks and uncertainties will dominate, since tradeoffs between current risks and future risks are sensitive to actors' risk orientations and time horizons, which vary across individuals and which are extremely difficult to measure.[37]

Domestic political considerations may also affect the strength of the preventive motivation for war. First, domestic social and political change may be a major cause of a state's decline in relative military power and potential. The internal sources of Austria's decline in 1914, for example, were demographic, social, and political as much as economic or military. Second, the time horizons of political leaders, particularly democratic political leaders, generally tend to be short, which reduces the incentives for current military actions in response to future threats.[38] Political leaders must bear any political costs of a war fought now, whereas the costs of delay can most likely be passed on to their successors. Bernard Brodie thus argues that the "willingness to gamble *now* at unlimited stakes for what is a highly speculative long-term gain" is "normally most uncharacteristic of politicians."[39]

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[37] On the current and future risks associated with preventive military action, see Jack S. Levy, "Prospect Theory and International Relations: Theoretical Applications and Analytical Problems," *Political Psychology* 13, no. 2 (June 1992): 302–03.

[38] Democratic leaders are more likely than authoritarian leaders to be thrown out of office after a losing war effort, which increases the expected costs of war now. Bruce Bueno de Mesquita, Alastair Smith, Randolph M. Siverson, and James D. Morrow, *The Logic of Political Survival* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2003).

[39] Bernard Brodie, *War and Politics* (New York: Macmillan, 1973), 26. The gamble Brodie mentions is more accurately described as aiming to avoid a long-term loss rather than to make a long-term gain. Given the well-established tendency for people to take greater risks to avoid losses than to secure gains, the willingness of leaders to undertake such gambles might be somewhat higher than Brodie suggests. On loss aversion, see Jack S. Levy, "The Implications of Framing and Loss Aversion for International Conflict,"

A third consideration is that institutional or cultural factors may lead democratic populaces to shy away from preventive war because the threat is distant rather than imminent. With respect to the United States, Brodie argues, "War is generally unpopular and the public mood inclines to support really bold action only in response to great anger or great fright. The fright must be something more than a sudden new rise in [the adversary's] capability."[40] For these and other reasons, Randall Schweller concludes that "only nondemocratic regimes wage preventive wars against rising opponents. Declining democratic states do not exercise this option," except against significantly weaker opponents where the expected costs of war are low. A number of contrary cases lead us to be skeptical of Schweller's argument, however, and perhaps it is best restated in more probabilistic terms—democracies are less likely than other states to initiate "preventive wars" against rising adversaries.[41]

Several of the factors discussed above suggest that an adverse power shift is more likely to lead to military action during international crises than at other times. It often takes a crisis to focus leaders' attention on both the reality of a negative power shift and its implications. Crises also provide political cover for leaders to rationalize the initiation of preventive action to domestic and international audiences.[42]

CASE SELECTION

Most empirical studies of the preventive motivation for war have focused, quite naturally, on cases in which shifting power and preventive logic led to war or to a military strike short of war.[43] In order to understand fully the conditions under which states resort to military force in an attempt to avert a relative decline, however, it is equally important to look at cases involving adverse power shifts that did not lead to a military response. For the purposes

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in *Handbook of War Studies II*, ed. Manus I. Midlarsky (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2000), 193–221.

[40] Bernard Brodie, *Strategy in the Missile Age* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1959), 237–39.

[41] Contrary cases include Israel's behavior in the 1956 Sinai War and in its 1981 attack against the Iraqi nuclear reactor. Preventive logic was also influential, by many accounts, in the American strategic calculus in the 2003 war against Iraq. See Jack S. Levy and Joseph R. Gochal, "Democracy and Preventive War: Israel and the 1956 Sinai Campaign," *Security Studies*, 11, no. 2 (Winter 2001/02): 1–49. It is possible that some types of democracies may be more inclined toward prevention than others. On variations in democracy and their implications, see Norrin M. Ripsman, *Peacemaking by Democracies: The Effect of State Autonomy on the Post-World War Settlements* (University Park: Pennsylvania State University Press, 2002).

[42] Political leaders in search for a justification for preventive action can provoke crises to give them the cover they need. See Lebow, *Between Peace and War*. Shifting international norms can also contribute to the perceived legitimacy of preventively motivated action. See Scott Silverstone, *Preventive War and American Democracy* (New York: Routledge, 2007).

[43] Copeland, *Origins of Major War*; Van Evera, *Causes of War*.

of theory building, we can learn as much from the dogs that do not bark as from the ones that do.[44]

The theoretical discussion in the last section suggests that preventive action is most likely when leaders of the declining state perceive that a power transition is virtually certain, that the magnitude of the adversary's advantage will be substantial, and that the adversary is implacably hostile and revisionist in its ambitions. Perhaps the most striking historical instance in which all of these conditions appeared to be present, but in which preventive military action did not follow, was Europe in the mid-to-late 1930s. Instead of waging war to defeat Germany while the opportunity was still available, Britain and France pursued policies of appeasement. This appears to be a major empirical anomaly in the theory of "preventive war," and we need to explain it.[45] A resolution of this puzzle will facilitate a better understanding of the conditions under which states are most likely to respond to adverse power shifts with military force, and also of a key historical episode that both changed the world and had a profound influence on subsequent generations of policy makers and populaces.

With these considerations in mind, let us turn to an analysis of British and French responses to the rise of German power in the 1930s. Our theoretical criteria lead us to identify several possible prevention points in the 1930s, or crises in which military action against the rising threat would have been most likely: (1) Hitler's March 1935 announcement of conscription; (2) the March 1936 crisis over Hitler's remilitarization of the Rhineland; (3) the *Anschluss* crisis of 1937–38, which united Austria and Germany; and (4) the 1938 Sudeten crisis, in which Germany threatened the territorial integrity of Czechoslovakia, a French ally. In this paper, we explore the crises over the Rhineland in 1936 and the Sudetenland in 1938. These were the most likely candidates for prevention due to the scope of the German challenges and the fact that, by this time, few had doubts about Hitler's intentions. That was not the case after the reinstitution of conscription in 1935. In the *Anschluss* crisis, the absence of Austrian resistance to Germany undercut any chance for a harder line in the West.

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[44] On the methodology of "negative case" selection, see James Mahoney and Gary Goertz, "The Possibility Principle: Choosing Negative Cases in Qualitative Research," *American Political Science Review* 98, no. 4 (November 2004): 653–70.

[45] Since the values of the theory's key independent variables all appear to point in the direction of war, the 1936 and 1938 cases fit the criteria of a "most likely case" for hypotheses on preventive war, and the absence of war would appear to significantly undercut the theory. The logic fits what Levy calls the "inverse Sinatra inference": if I cannot make it there, I cannot make it anywhere." Jack S. Levy, "Qualitative Methods in International Relations," in *Millennial Reflections on International Studies*, ed. Michael Brecher and Frank P. Harvey (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2002), 442. In arguing that the 1930s are not a most likely case for his neoclassical realist theory, Schweller suggests that they are a most likely case for realist balance of power theory. Schweller, *Unanswered Threats*, 69.

BRITAIN, FRANCE, AND GERMANY, 1936–38

Historical Background

After Adolf Hitler seized power in 1933, he began a steady campaign to restore Germany's great power status, which had suffered from World War I and the ensuing Versailles settlement. He announced in March 1935 that Germany would reintroduce conscription, abrogating the disarmament provisions of the Versailles Treaty. While the western European states were alarmed by the prospect of a revitalized German army, their response was muted. Aside from accelerating their own rearmament programs, Great Britain, France, and Italy limited their diplomatic response to a mere protest in the form of the so-called Stresa Front against Germany. More telling, however, was the British government's willingness to negotiate a bilateral naval agreement with Hitler, allowing Germany to rebuild its navy, provided that it did not exceed 35 percent of the Royal Navy's total tonnage and 45 percent of its submarine fleet. This treaty effectively legitimized Hitler's efforts to revise the Versailles settlement. It also marked the beginning of the strategy of appeasement.

In March 1936, Hitler continued his assault on Versailles by remilitarizing the Rhineland, an act that also violated the 1925 Locarno Pact, which Germany had freely negotiated and signed. In response, the Western powers convened the League of Nations Council to condemn the treaty violation and proposed staff talks between the British, French, and Belgian armies, but they took no forceful action. The British even seized upon the führer's proposal to commence negotiations on potential German colonial possessions and a new status quo in Europe.

After 1936, Hitler accelerated his bid to overturn the European order, claiming Austria and Sudeten Czechoslovakia for Germany on the grounds of national self-determination. The Versailles Treaty expressly prohibited the *Anschluss* (unification) of Germany and Austria, as it would threaten the fragile European balance of power. However, Hitler encouraged Austrian Nazis to pressure Austrian Chancellor Kurt von Schuschnigg for greater association with Germany. With Austria surrounded by German troops, von Schuschnigg appealed in vain for British support against German interference. Consequently, on 11 March 1938, the eve of a scheduled referendum over association with Germany, the chancellor resigned and Nazi leader Arthur Seyss-Inquart succeeded him, signaling the completion of the *Anschluss*. The Western democracies responded with weak condemnations.

At the same time, with the Reich's encouragement, Sudeten Germans pushed the Czechoslovak government for autonomy. Under pressure from Britain and France to avoid war with Germany, Czech president Edvard Beneš made numerous concessions to the German minority. He allowed greater Sudeten German representation in the local administration and even proposed participation of the Sudeten German Party (SdP) in the governing

coalition. Nonetheless, buoyed by the *Anschluss*, which allowed the Reich to surround Czechoslovakia, SdP leader Konrad Henlein demanded the outright incorporation of the Sudetenland into Germany. As German troops prepared to seize the region by force in September 1938, and after several failed attempts at compromise in the hopes of avoiding war, British Prime Minister Neville Chamberlain demanded a conference of British, French, German, and Italian representatives on 29 September in Munich. Rather than defending the territorial integrity of Czechoslovakia, the Western powers compelled the Czech government to capitulate to virtually all of Hitler's demands, though they did guarantee the Czechoslovak rump state against further German territorial ambitions.

Conventional Explanations: The Literature on Appeasement

How do we explain British and French inaction in the face of growing German power and repeated German violations of international agreements? Why were British and French leaders not swayed by preventive logic to use force to block the rise of Germany before the strategic window shifted in Hitler's favor, even though nearly all of the hypothesized conditions for "preventive war" appear to be present?

Although international relations theorists and diplomatic historians rarely focus directly on the puzzling absence of preventive war in the 1930s, their extensive focus on the policy of appeasement or the absence of balancing amounts to the same thing. Conventional explanations generally trace appeasement to the naïve belief that appeasement could satisfy Hitler's ambitions and avoid war, the Western belief that Hitler's desire to bring German–speaking peoples into a single state was consistent with the principles of national self-determination celebrated at Versailles, the constraints imposed by a pacifist and war-weary public, and the greater priority given to rebuilding economies shattered by the Great War and the Great Depression than to playing balance of power politics.[46]

Early historians of the interwar period, who were influenced by Churchill and who influenced a subsequent generation of political realists, attacked appeasement as a naïve policy pursued by weak leaders who thought that the Versailles Treaty was too severe, that the German desire to rearm and reclaim lost territories with majority German populations was legitimate, and that Hitler could be swayed from conquest by generous concessions.[47] Schweller,

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[46] For a useful review of the evolving literature on appeasement, see Robert J. Caputi, *Neville Chamberlain and Appeasement* (Selinsgrove, PA: Susquehanna University Press, 2000). We provide a more detailed analysis and critique of the appeasement literature in Norrin Ripsman and Jack S. Levy, "The Realism of Appeasement in the 1930s: Buying Time for Rearmament" (paper, International Studies Association annual meeting, San Diego, CA, 21–25 March 2006).

[47] On the influence of Churchill and the "Guilty Men" thesis, see Caputi, *Neville Chamberlain*, chap. 3. See also Cato, *Guilty Men* (London: Victor Gollancz, 1940); Hans Morgenthau, *Politics Among Nations:*

similarly, argues that weak British and French leaders were constrained from adopting strategies of prevention or balancing by pacifist populations, which viewed many of Hitler's demands as legitimate.[48]

Other historians have rejected the "Guilty Men" interpretation and traced appeasement to the preoccupation of leaders with their precarious economies in the wake of a destructive world war and the world financial crisis of the 1930s, as well as the immense costs of rebuilding a weak post-World War I British military apparatus to sustain a European war. Paul Kennedy argues that Britain's pivotal role in the world economy left the country far more vulnerable to a world-wide economic slump than its more protectionist neighbors, so that avoiding the economic disruptions of war became Britain's highest priority.[49] Neil Forbes suggests that British appeasement in the Rhineland Crisis stemmed from a concern in the City of London over the large German debt to British capital markets.[50] Anthony Adamthwaite links the French retreat throughout the 1930s to a domestic economic crisis that eroded its power and threatened its empire,[51] and others contend that the near bankruptcy of the French treasury made the French government eager to avoid war over the Rhineland.[52] Stephen Schuker combines these factors and argues that France "faced a combination of political, economic, and military deterrents to action. Any one of them would have provided justification for hesitation. Given their mutually reinforcing nature, no responsible French government could risk war."[53]

We argue that none of these factors adequately explain British and French inaction against a rising Germany. We demonstrate that after 1936 the vast majority of British and French leaders did not believe that German demands were legitimate and brooked few illusions about the nature of the German threat or the inevitability of war. Furthermore, while public opinion strongly supported a conciliatory policy in 1936, after the Rhineland and Austrian crises and the war in Spain, large segments of the British and French populations favored a firm stand against the dictators over Czechoslovakia. British leaders were concerned about the economy, but primarily in terms

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The Struggle for Power and Peace, 6th ed. (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1985), 6; Kenneth N. Waltz, *Theory of International Politics* (New York: Addison-Wesley, 1979), 175.

[48] Schweller, "Domestic Structure and Preventive War"; Schweller, *Unanswered Threats*, 69–79.

[49] Paul Kennedy, "The Tradition of Appeasement in British Foreign Policy, 1865–1939," in *Strategy and Diplomacy, 1870–1945* (London: George Allen and Unwin, 1983), chap. 1. Kennedy also emphasizes the strategic overextension of the British empire, pacifist public opinion, and the traditional prominence of conceptions of justice and morality in British political culture.

[50] Neil Forbes, "London Banks, the German Standstill Agreements, and 'Economic Appeasement' in the 1930s," *Economic History Review*, ser. 2, vol. 40, no. 4 (1987): 571–87.

[51] Anthony Adamthwaite, *France and the Coming of the Second World War, 1936–1939* (London: Cass, 1977).

[52] Stephen Schuker, "France and the Remilitarization of the Rhineland, 1936," *French Historical Studies* 14 (1986): 299–338; James T. Emmerson, *The Rhineland Crisis* (London: Maurice Temple Smith, 1977), 111–12.

[53] Schuker, "France and the Remilitarization of the Rhineland," 304.

of its ability to sustain a long war with Germany. There was a consensus among French military and political leaders, probably in 1936, but definitely by 1938, for a military confrontation with Germany: but only with British military support. British leaders withheld their support because they believed that Germany was already too strong, that Britain was overextended and faced other enemies besides Germany, and that they were too vulnerable to German air attacks, particularly in 1938. They anticipated that the balance of power could be reversed within a few years, however, and they wanted to postpone war until they had rearmed adequately.[54]

The View from Paris

Contrary to conventional accounts, the French government, which had more directly at stake than the British, was willing to stand up to Germany in both crises. French leaders feared that German remilitarization and fortification of the Rhineland would secure Hitler's Western front and make it difficult for France to respond to a German offensive against French allies in the east.[55] France, more than Britain, also had reputational interests at stake, having guaranteed Czechoslovakia against German aggression as part of the 1925 Locarno Treaties.

In 1936, French political leaders believed that Germany was likely to initiate a war within two years and that Germany would be better prepared for that war if it first remilitarized and fortified the Rhineland.[56] When they learned that a move into the Rhineland was imminent, they wanted to respond firmly and they searched for an effective countermeasure.[57] Foreign

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[54] Methodological Note: We rely on government documents wherever possible. This is a much easier task for Britain than for France. Extensive British Cabinet meeting minutes and the position papers under Cabinet consideration are available for this period at the Public Records Office in Kew, England. We supplement this analysis with additional sources, including Neville Chamberlain's private paper collection at the University of Birmingham. In contrast, the French Cabinet did not keep official meeting minutes, and many of the private papers of leading officials are either not open to the public or difficult to access. We attempt to reconstruct French policy by examining the published government document collection of the period, the available documents of the French Foreign Ministry archives, private paper collections of Edouard Daladier and others, British records of conversations between heads of government, published memoirs of the key players, and secondary historical accounts. Thus we are more confident in our assessment of British perceptions and preferences than we are for those of the French. We cannot be certain, particularly in the French case, that positions taken in public were not either bluff or for public consumption or that memoirs are not used to misrepresent the writer's role in catastrophic decisions. Nonetheless, we are satisfied that we present a plausible account of French decisions based on the available evidence.

[55] François-Poncet to Flandin, 3 March 1936, Grande Bretagne, France, Ministère des Affaires Etrangères (MAE) Archives, Correspondance Politique et Commerciale, 1918–1940, vol. 298, 10; MAE, "Talking Points for the 10 March Conference," 9 March 1936, Grande Bretagne, MAE, Correspondance Politique et Commerciale, 1918–1940, vol. 299, 190–92.

[56] Restricted Communication to the Chief of the General Staff, intelligence summary, 15 January 1936, France, *Documents Diplomatiques Français, 1932–1939* (DDF), ser. 2, vol. 1, no. 62, 90.

[57] Ibid., 90–91.

Minister Pierre-Etienne Flandin and Prime Minister Albert Sarraut, in particular, wanted to issue an unequivocal threat, alone or preferably in conjunction with Britain. The threat would demand the withdrawal of German forces from the Rhineland, and it would be coupled with political condemnations in the League of Nations and appeals for League and Locarno support for French military measures.[58] Flandin, backed by the foreign ministry, believed that such a threat might be effective and induce a German retreat, but he was willing to fight if Germany pressed ahead.[59]

The French military establishment was less eager to confront Germany.[60] Chief of the General Staff Maurice Gamelin assured Flandin that the French armed services would do their best to implement whatever response the government decided upon, but he emphasized that as a result of the systematic underfunding of the French military throughout the 1930s, and a defensive doctrine symbolized by the Maginot Line, France had no unilateral offensive military options, save occupation of the Saar.[61] At a 19 February French chiefs of staff meeting, "Gamelin judged that it was impossible to envisage that France alone could occupy the demilitarized zone" to counter a German move.[62] In his view, in any bilateral conflict with Germany, Germany would have "a marked superiority" in military potential, including "population and industrial power" and "military production already harnessed, which can instantly be brought to bear, whereas ours would require significant delays at the outset and would possibly yield…inferior results than expected."[63] Air

[58] Flandin to War Minister General Maurin, 14 February 1936, DDF, no. 186, 277–78. The then French representative to the League of Nations, Joseph Paul-Boncour, notes that until their failed consultations with London, Sarraut and Flandin "seemed quite resolved not to accept this brutal violation of the Locarno commitments." He recalls Sarraut's bold declaration on 7 March "that he would not leave Strasbourg under the German cannon." Joseph Paul-Boncour, *Entre Deux Guerres: Souvenirs sur la IIIe République*, vol. 3 (Paris: Plon, 1946), 30.

[59] Some, like Flandin, believed that a strong stand might lead to the collapse of Hitler's regime. Emmerson, *The Rhineland* Crisis, 126. In fact, Hitler later remarked that "[i]f France had marched into the Rhineland … we would have had to withdraw with our tails between our legs." Adolph Hitler, cited in Paul Schmidt, *Hitler's Interpreter* (London: Macmillan, 1951), 320.

[60] Flandin found it ironic that "uniquely in the history of France, the Foreign Affairs Minister, generally turned toward conciliation and negotiation, took the pose of a bellicose minister in front of military ministers who did not think at all of fighting for the Rhineland." Pierre-Etienne Flandin, *Politique française 1919–1940* (Paris: Les Editions Nouvelles, 1947), 196. See also Jean-Baptiste Duroselle, *La Décadence: 1932–1939* (Paris: Imprimerie Nationale, 1979), 164.

[61] Between 1930 and 1934 alone, the defense budget declined by 17 percent. Flandin, *Politique française*, 198–99. On the dismal state of the French military, see Schuker, "France and the Remilitarization of the Rhineland," 318–20.

[62] Conference of the Chiefs of Staff, meeting summary, 19 February 1936, DDF, ser. 2, vol. 1, no. 203, 301. Indeed, throughout both crises, Gamelin reports pleading to deaf ears for greater resources for an under-equipped military. He steadfastly maintained that "it would be illusory to count on decisive results vis-à-vis Germany outside of the framework of a coalition." Note from General Gamelin, 28 March 1936, DDF, ser. 2, vol. 1, no. 525, 700; Maurice Gamelin, *Servir* (Paris: Plon, 1946–47), 316–17; Duroselle, *La Décadence*, 166.

[63] Note from General Gamelin, 28 March 1936, DDF, ser. 2, vol. 1, no. 525, 700. Duroselle notes that "Gamelin believed that the German forces were already superior to the French forces. That idea was

Minister Marcel Déat concluded that "we were completely certain that we faced, as of the spring of 1936, an air force and a ground army superior to ours in materiel and training, with a reservoir of men and an enormous productive capacity."[64]

In light of this bleak assessment of the military situation, Flandin and his civilian advisors pushed for a joint British and French operation.[65] Even prior to Hitler's 7 March announcement, Flandin had resolved that "the French government would not proceed with any isolated action. It would not act, except with the consent of the Locarno signatories."[66] Belgium, however, was too small and militarily inconsequential; Mussolini was unlikely to support France while Paris continued to impose oil sanctions against Italy; and France's Polish, Czech, and Yugoslav allies in eastern and central Europe were also judged to be too weak to be of assistance.[67] Flandin, therefore, tried to coax Great Britain to forceful action, but soon backed off when it became clear that no British aid was forthcoming.[68] All that remained was a passive diplomatic response under the auspices of the League of Nations.

As the Czechoslovak crisis unfolded in 1938, French military as well as civilian leaders greatly feared growing German power and the potential loss of French allies in central and eastern Europe. With Germany's larger population (72 million Germans, after the Anschluss, compared to 42 million French) and longer work week during the German rearmament campaign, Germany was outstripping France in defense productivity by three to one.[69] As a result, leaders such as Prime Minister Edouard Daladier and Gamelin were adamant that France should not repeat its 1936 mistake and must honor its commitment to Czechoslovakia and fight Germany before the balance shifted too greatly in Germany's favor.[70] Daladier believed that war with Germany was inevitable, and that the failure to block Germany would result, "sooner or

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widespread throughout political circles." Duroselle, *La Décadence*, 166. See also Schuker, "France and the Remilitarization of the Rhineland," 304.

[64] Marcel Déat, *Mémoires Politiques* (Paris: Denöel, 1989), 353–54.

[65] Indeed, French military leaders had learned from the 1924 Ruhr occupation that they needed a firm commitment that the British would participate or else they would be abandoned. Maurice Vaïsse, *Sécurité d'Abord: La Politique Française en Matière de Désarmement, 9 décembre 1930–17 avril 1934* (Paris: Pédone, 1981).

[66] Note from the Minister's Office, 27 February 1936, DDF, ser. 2, vol. 1, no. 241, 339; Flandin to Charles Corbin, the French ambassador to London, 5 March 1936, DDF, ser. 2, vol. 1, 397.

[67] French Ambassador to Poland Léon Noël, *La Guerre de 39 a Commencé 4 ans plus tot* (Paris: France Empire, 1979), 51.

[68] The British actively tried to "discourage any military action by France against Germany," confident that France would not act alone. Anthony Eden, "Germany and the Locarno Treaty," 8 March 1936, Cabinet Memorandum, Public Records Office, Kew, England, CP 73/36, CAB 24/261, 188–91 (hereafter cited as Public Records Office reference number).

[69] "II," undated, Private Papers of Edouard Daladier, Archives Nationales, Paris, 496AP/9, 2DA2/Dr4, 1 (hereafter cited as archive reference number).

[70] Gamelin believed that it was worth considering a war with Germany even if there was no hope of saving Czechoslovakia. Gamelin, *Servir*, 344–45.

later," in a European war "that the Western Powers would not win."[71] As he emphasized to British leaders in April 1938, "the actions of Napoleon were far inferior to the present aims of the German Reich." If Germany were allowed to seize the resources of central Europe without opposition, "she would then turn against the Western Powers, and it would be our own blindness which would have provided Germany with the very supplies she required for the long war which she admitted she was not now in a position to wage."[72]

While Chamberlain argued that Britain and France were still too weak to assist Prague, Poland was an unreliable ally, and Stalin's purges had made the Red Army an insignificant source of potential support, Daladier remained optimistic. He argued that the Czechoslovak army could contribute 500,000 well-trained and well-armed men and that Russia, "which still possessed the strongest air force in Europe," could also be counted on for support.[73]

While Daladier's predecessor, Leon Blum, also believed that "Russia would intervene,"[74] other French leaders, including Foreign Minister Georges Bonnet and Gamelin, were more measured in their estimation of Russian support. Stalin had declared that he would support Czechoslovakia if (and only if) either Poland or Romania allowed the Red Army to pass through their territory. Both countries, however, adamantly refused and the only reliable assistance that Moscow could offer was its air force, which could overfly Romanian territory. It was clear, though, that French leaders counted on at least some support from Czech forces, Russian air power, and possibly the Polish army.[75]

Inspired by his optimistic assessment of allied capabilities, Daladier pushed for a vigorous joint response. He emphasized that "if the common policy of France and Great Britain was inspired by sentiments of weakness, if we submitted on every occasion before violent measures and the use of force, the only result would be to precipitate renewed violence and ensure further success for the use of forceful methods."[76] While he and Bonnet were willing to place additional pressure on the Czech Government to make concessions to the Sudeten Germans, they expected these to be rejected by a Reich bent on conquest. Consequently, they urged Britain to guarantee Czech

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[71] Book manuscript on Munich, undated, Private Papers of Edouard Daladier, 496AP/8, 2DA1/Dr3, 47.

[72] "Visit of French Ministers to London," meeting summary, 3 May 1938, CP 38 (109), CAB 24/276, 301–02.

[73] Ibid., 302.

[74] "Minutes of the Permanent Committee on National Defense," 15 March 1938, DDF, ser. 2, vol. 8, no. 446, 824.

[75] Georges Bonnet, *Le Quai D'Orsay sous Trois Républiques, 1870–1961* (Paris: Fayard, 1961), 193. The Romanian government did not officially consent to Russian overflight but acknowledged that it could not prevent Soviet planes from flying over Romanian territory on the way to assist Czechoslovakia. On uncertainty regarding Poland's likely behavior, see Murray, *Change in the European Balance of Power*, 235–38.

[76] "Visit of French Ministers to London," CP 38 (109), CAB 24/276, 301–02.

borders jointly with France, and use force to defend them if necessary.[77] The French were, thus, eager to honor their commitments and stand up to the Germans militarily if they could garner British support.

Without British support, however, French military options were extremely limited, as Daladier well knew.[78] The French military was still underfunded and its doctrine was fundamentally defensive in orientation.[79] In light of worsening relations with Italy due to Italian involvement in Spain, French military planners increasingly concentrated their efforts in the Mediterranean theater at the expense of Central Europe.[80] In addition, the French leadership during this crisis was operating under intelligence information that consistently overestimated German military power (particularly its air power) and underestimated French preparedness for a bilateral encounter without allies.[81] They were, therefore, reluctant to wage war with Germany without help. Under the circumstances, they viewed a strategy of initiating a war with Germany (before Germany strengthened itself with more central and Eastern European conquests), as a viable option only if it were to be clearly warranted by overt German aggression against a French ally, and only with British participation.[82]

The lack of a British guarantee of assistance, however, restrained them again. The British made it clear that that they would pursue a common policy with France only if the French avoided war over Czechoslovakia. As a result, the French government, lacking unilateral military options, opted for appeasement to avoid a rupture with their primary ally.[83] They agreed to

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[77] Ibid., 302–04.

[78] On 15 March when then-Foreign Minister Paul-Boncour asked what unilateral options France had to honor its pledge to Czechoslovakia, then defense minister Daladier responded that "the only aid that she could provide is indirect: it consists of mobilizing to keep the German troops along our borders," leaving Germany with fewer available resources for a campaign against Czechoslovakia. "Minutes of the Permanent Committee on National Defense," *DDF*, 824.

[79] As Robert J. Young observes, in 1938, "[a]gain and as always, no-one seriously proposed using the existing arsenal to pre-empt the German buildup. French weaponry, including the bombers, was intended to be used only for defensive, or at the most, counter-offensive, purposes." Robert J. Young, *France and the Origins of the Second World War* (Basingstoke: Macmillan, 1996), 28.

[80] Adamthwaite argues that while French leaders identified Germany as the ultimate enemy, tensions with Italy due to the Ethiopian crisis and the Spanish civil war led French military leaders to "give priority to the Mediterranean theater. The defense of French interests in central and Eastern Europe had to take second place." Adamthwaite, *France and the Coming of the Second World War*, xiii.

[81] Peter Jackson, *France and the Nazi Menace: Intelligence and Policy Making, 1933–1939* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000), 274–82. Adamthwaite agrees that "the French General Staff painted the military picture blacker than it really was." Adamthwaite, *France and the Coming of the Second World War*, 234. In a later study, however, Adamthwaite concludes that after the Rhineland crisis "preventive war. . .was not feasible." Anthony Adamthwaite, *Grandeur and Misery: France's Bid for Power in Europe, 1914–1940* (New York: St. Martin's, 1995), 209.

[82] See General Staff on the General Conduct of a Ground War Memorandum, 15 March 1938, *DDF*, ser. 2, vol. 8, no. 445, 818–24, esp. 821.

[83] Daladier explained, "We were conscious. . .of the necessity of compromise. A rupture of cooperation would have the worst consequences." Book Manuscript on Munich, Private Papers of Edouard Daladier, 496AP/8, 2DA1/Dr3, 48.

pressure Prague to make additional concessions to the Sudeten Germans and take away any pretext Hitler had to invade.[84] After the Franco-British meetings of April 1938, therefore, "the political and military leadership had decided that France could not effectively assist her Czech ally and must seek a peaceful outcome to the crisis."[85]

Consistent with his preferences, however, Daladier seized upon Hitler's new demands in September 1938 as a means of pushing the British again to consider preventive military action. After Hitler violated the spirit of his compromise agreement with Chamberlain and presented the British leader with an ultimatum to cede large swathes of Czechoslovakia outright to Germany without a plebiscite, Daladier made a passionate appeal to the British Cabinet on 25 September that it would be "dishonorable" to surrender to Hitler. Daladier's optimism was buoyed in large measure by reports from French generals Paul Stehlin and Alphonse Georges that indicated the German Westwall (the Siegfried Line it was constructing on the frontier with France) was far from completion. German troops could therefore be paralyzed by the prospect of fighting French forces in the West, a British naval blockade, Czechoslovak troops in the East, and a possible Polish intervention.[86] The following day, Gamelin explained the logistics of such a war, emphasizing that "Germany would be much stronger in a year or two. If we abandon Czechoslovakia today, [Germany] would be enriched by millions of residents, mineral and industrial wealth, and notably the Skoda factories."[87] Chamberlain's last-chance meeting with Hitler, however, defeated Daladier's gambit and compelled the French to follow the British lead and appease Hitler over the Sudetenland, while guaranteeing the rest of Czechoslovakia against further German aggression.

In conclusion, French leaders perceived a significant threat from Germany in the near future and preferred war in 1938, rather than to risk the consequences of the continued rise of Germany. The primary constraints on military action were not domestic pressures or a weak economy, but their military inability to take on Germany alone and the absence of British military support. This better-now-than-later strategic logic, tempered by concerns over the availability of military allies (which underlay French policy preferences), is fully consistent with our theoretical propositions on "preventive war."

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[84] Georges Bonnet, *Défense de la Paix: de Washington au Quai d'Orsay* (Geneva: C. Bourquin, 1948), 116, 160.

[85] Adamthwaite, *France and the Coming of the Second World War*, xv.

[86] "III," undated, Private Papers of Edouard Daladier, 496AP/9, 2DA2/Dr4, 1; "Indispensable," undated, Private Papers of Edouard Daladier, 496AP/9, 2DA2/Dr4, 1.

[87] "Munich (Suite)," undated memoir, Private Papers of Edouard Daladier, 496AP/8, 2DA1/Dr2/sdrb, 7–9; Book Manuscript on Munich, Private Papers of Edouard Daladier, 496AP/8, 2DA1/Dr3, 95–98.

The View from London

Although British leaders perceived that German power was rising relative to Britain's, they refused to join France in a war against Germany because they believed that Germany had already surpassed Britain in military power. They also believed, however, that Germany would not be able to sustain its advantage, and that British rearmament, which had begun in 1935, would allow Britain to catch up to German military strength somewhere between 1938 and 1940. A rearmed Britain would fare much better against Germany then than it would in the mid-1930s. Appeasement was a deliberate strategy of delay designed to buy time until British rearmament would enable Britain to take on Germany with reasonable prospects for victory.[88]

World War I was traumatic for Britain in terms of its devastating economic effects, social consequences, and the recognition of the increasing vulnerability of a once-glorious empire. The results were anti-war attitudes and a significant reduction in military spending, coupled with the pursuit of international arms reduction agreements, while the country concentrated on rebuilding its war-torn economy.[89] Those policies left the country without adequately equipped armed forces to sustain a major war in the mid-1930s. In fact, it was not until after Hitler's conscription declaration that Prime Minister Stanley Baldwin initiated a serious rearmament effort in 1935.

In mid-February 1936, just three weeks before the Rhineland remilitarization, British Foreign Secretary Anthony Eden articulated his rationale for appeasement to the Cabinet. He circulated a paper by Permanent Undersecretary of State for Foreign Affairs Robert Vansittart on the consequences of the German military program: "The aggressor will be located in advance——there is no longer doubt in Europe as to his eventual identity [Germany]—and the only chance of restraining him will be that the collective strength of the potential victims should be twice as great in spirit and in truth, and not only on paper." Yet, "…we are, in the matter of most armaments and all munitions, already weaker than Germany." "Moreover, owing to the late date of starting our own re-equipment (and our associates in the League have not even begun to think of starting yet), it is now inevitable that Germany will be ready for aggression long before we and the League can be ready for

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[88] Thus we agree with John Mearsheimer's assessment that "…the United Kingdom allowed the Sudetenland … to be absorbed by Nazi Germany, in part because British policymakers believed that the balance of power favored the Third Reich but that it would shift in favor of the United Kingdom and France over time." Mearsheimer, *Tragedy of Great Power Politics*, 165.

[89] In 1935, two years after Hitler came to power and the year before the crisis in the Rhineland, British military expenditures were 28 percent of those of Germany. In terms of the percentage share of the British national budget, this figure was only a third of the size of expenditures prior to World War I. Murray, *The Change in the European Balance of Power*, 20–21; Robert Paul Shay, Jr., *British Rearmament in the Thirties: Politics and Profits* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1977), 19–20; Schweller, *Unanswered Threats*, 72.

defence."[90] The Cabinet agreed with Eden that Britain's key strategic goal was to stall Germany until the British were prepared to engage in a major war.

Consequently, on the eve of the Rhineland Crisis, in response to French Foreign Minister Flandin's request that the British clarify their policy in the event of a German attempt to re-enter the Rhineland, Eden counseled restraint and diplomacy because they did not yet have viable military options. The Cabinet minutes report, "this view was developed by the Prime Minister, the Chancellor of the Exchequer and others who pointed out that the reality of the situation was that neither France nor England was really in a position to take effective military action against Germany in the event of a violation of the Treaty of Locarno." The key, they argued, was to find a way to limit German rearmament while British rearmament caught up. Eden's preferred solution was to allow the Germans to reoccupy the Rhineland in return for an air pact that would place strict limits on the German air force, since the government was concerned that the rapid pace of German rearmament could make the Luftwaffe more than a match for the Royal Air Force (RAF) and the insufficient British air defenses.[91] As a result, when Hitler sent his troops into the Rhineland on 7 March, the British Cabinet was upset they had lost a bargaining chip that might have been used to moderate German rearmament.

The view that Britain had no good military options was reinforced by reports from the armed services ministers throughout the crisis. They indicated that Britain's ability to protect British shipping from German pocket battleships was suspect, home defenses were porous, and "the air position was deplorable," due to the presence of British battle cruisers in the Mediterranean and airmen, aircraft, and soldiers in Egypt.[92] No one in the Cabinet gave any serious thought to military action against Germany, given that they believed that the Germans had the strategic advantage, which would take time to counter.[93]

Under these circumstances, the government authorized Eden to discourage any French military response, which they believed would be disastrous. Instead, they opted for a diplomatic response within the framework of Locarno that allowed them to condemn the treaty violation, while exploring the positive aspects of Hitler's 7 March statement—namely his offer to consider returning to the League of Nations and to negotiate a new status quo for the Rhine as a basis for Western security—in order to postpone the conflict until the military balance was more favorable.

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[90] "Germany," 11 February 1936, CP 42/36, CAB 24/260, 154–55 (parentheses added).

[91] Cabinet 15 (36), 5 March 1936, CAB 23/83, 236–37. The Cabinet endorsed this policy (240).

[92] Cabinet 20 (36), 16 March 1936, CAB 23/83, 319. On 11 March the Cabinet noted that "our position at home and in home waters was a disadvantageous one, whether from the point of view of the Navy, Army or Air Force, or anti-aircraft defence." Cabinet 18 (36), 11 March 1936, CAB 23/83, 291–92.

[93] Cabinet 18 (36), 11 March 1936, CAB 23/83, 295.

In the 1938 crisis, the Cabinet again judged that the moment was not yet right for a military confrontation. Shortly after Hitler completed his putsch against Austria, the British foreign policy establishment began discussions of Germany's inevitable move toward Sudeten Czechoslovakia. On 22 March, the Cabinet met to determine whether to issue a guarantee to Czechoslovakia or to support the French if they were to honor their commitment to Prague. The Cabinet minutes of this discussion, which are quite candid and revealing, tackle the issue of "preventive war" head-on and clearly explain the government's eagerness to avoid war.[94]

The new foreign secretary, the first Lord Halifax, began the discussion by considering a chiefs of staff report on the military implications of German aggression against Czechoslovakia. This report concluded that Great Britain and France did not possess the material capabilities to save Czechoslovakia from a German invasion, questioned the value of support from Yugoslavia, Romania, Hungary, Turkey, and Greece, and "gave a deplorable account of the French air position…as well as of our own position in respect of anti-aircraft defence." In addition, Britain faced a number of other threats to its strategic interests—including potential challenges to the empire and critical sea lanes by Japan and Italy—and these multiple threats further constrained British military options against Germany.[95] In this vein, Keith Robbins argues that an important strategic rationale for appeasement was to prevent a war with Germany that Japan and Italy could capitalize on at the expense of a poorly defended British Empire.[96] Consequently, Lord Halifax urged the Cabinet to pressure both Prague and Paris to accept a negotiated settlement between the Czech Government and the Sudeten Germans that would be acceptable to Hitler. Prime Minister Neville Chamberlain emphasized that this strategy rested on the premise "that we should speed up our existing

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[94] Cabinet 15 (38), 22 March 1938, CAB 23/93, 33–42.

[95] Ibid.; Ian Colvin, *The Chamberlain Cabinet* (New York: Taplinger, 1971), 64; Schuker, "France and the Remilitarization of the Rhineland," 312–13.

[96] Keith Robbins, *Appeasement* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1997), 57–62. See also the contributions by Michael Howard and Christopher Layne in *British Appeasement and the Origins of World War II*, ed. R.J.Q. Adams, (Lexington, MA: D. C. Heath, 1993), esp. 51–53, 163–64. The multiple threats to British interests raised the old question of how to prioritize among different security goals. The Defense Requirements Committee, set up in 1933, decided in 1937 that priority would be given to homeland defense, followed by protection of the sea lanes, protection of the Empire, and lastly the continental commitment. Thus military spending was concentrated on the air force and the navy, and the Cabinet decided that the army would focus on defending the empire and providing an antiaircraft defense of the homeland. The implication was that "the British would not … prepare for another land war in Europe." John J. Mearsheimer, *Conventional Deterrence* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1983), 78–79. See also Michael Eliot Howard, *The Continental Commitment: the Dilemma of British Defence Policy in the Era of the Two World Wars* (London: Maurice Temple Smith, 1972). Others argue that perceptions of defensive dominance in the 1930s led British leaders to believe that France would be able to withstand the initial phases of a German assault. This strengthened the British government's inclination to give priority to its navy and air defenses–which could defend the homeland and empire—rather than to its army, confident that there would be time to come to the aid of France. Christensen and Snyder, "Chain Gangs and Passed Bucks"; Christensen, "Perceptions and Alliances in Europe."

plans for rearmament" and reach an understanding with Mussolini in order to be prepared for a future confrontation with Germany.[97]

Unlike during the Rhineland crisis, some members of the Cabinet (unspecified in the Cabinet minutes) voiced considerable dissent, encouraging the government to issue a firm guarantee to Prague. They expressly advocated a "preventive war," contending that Germany would be strengthened by further surrenders as they absorbed Sudeten Czechoslovakia and other central and eastern European territories. In their assessment, "today Germany was ill-prepared for a long war. Two years hence with this access of strength she might be much better prepared for that contingency." They concluded, therefore, "that disadvantageous as might be the circumstances today for intervention, they would be still more so tomorrow."[98]

The majority of the Cabinet, however, sided with Lord Halifax and Chamberlain. They judged that there was little that Great Britain or France could do to save Czechoslovakia. Moreover, they concluded that it was still too early to challenge Hitler militarily because the RAF and British air defenses were not yet ready to withstand an assault by German bombers. They judged, however, that the situation would improve within two years, when "the Royal Air Force would at any rate be armed with up-to-date aeroplanes and the anti-aircraft defences with modern weapons."[99]

Another factor significantly influencing the majority of the Cabinet was the recognition, even prior to the Rhineland crisis, that Britain faced a major strategic dilemma: While Britain needed a massive rearmament effort to deal with the growing external threat, it lacked the requisite economic strength and financial reserves. They believed that unrestrained rearmament, while helping to minimize the short-term military threat from Germany, would severely weaken the British economy and threaten to undermine Britain's long-term military potential and to prevail in the only kind of war they could win. Moreover, they believed that a hard line against Hitler risked providing him an excuse to initiate the short-term war they wanted to avoid and believed they would lose, and in the process precipitate a collapse of the global trading system upon which British prosperity and long-term military potential depended. Chamberlain in particular, going back to his days as chancellor of the exchequer, had always believed that the economy was the "fourth arm of defence."[100]

Consequently, as in 1936, the British decision to forgo military action was taken in advance of the German challenge due to the Cabinet's belief that war in 1940 would be far better than war in 1938. Thus, when the crisis

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[97] Cabinet 15 (38), 22 March 1938, CAB 23/93, 33–37.
[98] Ibid., 37–39.
[99] Ibid., 41; Lee, "I See Dead People."
[100] Kennedy, *Strategy and Diplomacy*, 102; Schroeder, "Munich and the British Tradition"; Shay, *British Rearmament in the Thirties*; Keith Robbins, *Appeasement*, 2nd ed. (Oxford: Blackwell, 1997), chap. 5.

came to a head in September 1938, Lord Halifax discouraged the French from responding vigorously and Chamberlain secured the short-lived Munich agreement as an attempt to buy time for rearmament.

In conclusion, British behavior from 1936–38 did not violate the predictions of "preventive war" theory. Instead, the premises of the theory were not satisfied, so the theory does not apply. Preventive logic assumes that expected trends in relative military power are monotonically downward, generating the belief that war is better-now-than-later. The dominant view of British leaders was that current downward trends in relative power would be reversed by the end of the decade, which generated the reverse logic of better-later-than-now.

The Limitations of Alternative Explanations

We shall now return to conventional interpretations of British and French restraint in the 1930s, and demonstrate why they do not provide adequate explanations of the absence of a military response to the rise of Germany from 1935–38.

The argument that appeasement was a naïve strategy based on a mistaken belief that German behavior could be moderated and war avoided through strategic concessions (common in historiography immediately after the war and in much of the political science literature as well) is not consistent with the documentary evidence. On the British side, Cabinet minutes and memoranda clearly indicate that in 1936, Eden understood the nature of Hitler's challenge and believed that war with Germany was inevitable. In 1938, Chamberlain and Lord Halifax also doubted Hitler's intentions and expected an eventual confrontation with Germany. Appeasement was their strategy for dealing with their perceived short-term power disadvantage—a means of buying time until British rearmament restored the balance to their favor.[101]

This view is reinforced by an examination of Chamberlain's private paper collection. Soon after the *Anschluss*, Chamberlain wrote to his sister: "It is perfectly evident surely now that force is the only argument Germany understands and that 'collective security' cannot offer any prospect of preventing such events until it can show a viable force of overwhelming strength backed by determination to use it."[102] Halifax, similarly, told union leaders in April that "…war with the Reich appeared from now on as inevitable, but

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[101] For this reason, we also reject Steven E. Lobell's argument that appeasement was designed to empower German moderates in the hope of restraining Hitler. Steven E. Lobell, "The Second Face of Appeasement: Britain's 'Smart' Appeasement of Japan and Germany," *International Relations of the Asia-Pacific* 7, no. 1 (2007): 73–98.

[102] Chamberlain to Hilda Chamberlain, 13 March 1938, Papers of Neville Chamberlain, University of Birmingham Library, Special Collections, Birmingham, United Kingdom, NC 18/1/1041.

diplomacy had as its goal to delay it, to choose its terrain, and to fortify its means of defense."[103]

Even more so than their British counterparts, French leaders feared Nazi Germany and understood Hitler's territorial ambitions, but felt that they were powerless to attack Germany without British support. We therefore concur with Jackson's assessment that "French civilian and military *décideurs* had few illusions about the nature of the Nazi regime. Most were convinced, however, that France could not make war on Germany in 1938" without British participation.[104]

Nor is it correct to assert, as many do, that British and French leaders made concessions to Germany because they viewed Hitler's demands as legitimate and consistent with the ideals of national self-determination enunciated and celebrated in the Versailles treaty. It is true that the British public had some sympathy for German aspirations to exercise sovereign rights to the Rhineland, and that consequently British leaders feared that a war over the remilitarization of the Rhineland might be difficult to sell to the public. Nonetheless, the Cabinet was clearly outraged at the violation of international treaties (in the case of the Rhineland) and concerned about the threat of aggression against a sovereign state (in the case of Czechoslovakia).

The evidence provides only mixed support for the argument that a pacifist public compelled the Western democracies to pursue accommodative strategies. During the Rhineland crisis, British public opinion opposed the use of force[105] and the unstable French government, which faced its own pacifist public opinion, was in the midst of an election campaign.[106] In the British case, however, we have demonstrated that perceptions that the balance of power had already shifted in Germany's favor were enough to deter British leaders from undertaking military action, quite independently of public opinion. As for France, we have shown that French political leaders would have preferred military action against Germany, but only with British support. Their enthusiasm for war was tempered by the concerns of the French military, but we concluded that with British support war would have been

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[103] Corbin, French ambassador to London, to MAE, 7 April 1938, Grande Bretagne, MAE, Correspondance Politique et Commerciale, 1918–1940, vol. 278, 123–24. We explore the British appeasement policy and, in particular, Chamberlain's rationale for appeasement, more fully in Ripsman and Levy, "The Realism of Appeasement."

[104] Jackson, *France and the Nazi Menace*, 247.

[105] For this reason, Baldwin impressed on Eden during the crisis that "(t)hough personally friendly to France, he was clear in his mind that there would be no support in Britain for any military action by the French." Anthony Eden, *Facing the Dictators* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1962), 385.

[106] Flandin complained about the irresolution of his Cabinet colleagues: "A general mobilization only six weeks before the elections, what folly! declared certain of my colleagues, more preoccupied by domestic politics than foreign policy." Flandin, *Politique française*, 199. Duroselle states that "the French people absolutely did not want a violent action. They were responsible, but we cannot reproach them, because it is difficult for a democratic country, especially one bled dry, to accept a preventive war, even a just one." Duroselle, *La Décadence*, 178.

the likely outcome. Public opinion, therefore, does not appear to have been an insuperable obstacle to the use of force. We agree with Schuker, who concludes that French inaction in 1936 cannot be attributed to "...the dispirited national mood, the festering domestic conflict between left and right, or the currents of pacifism running beneath the body politic. These factors merely provided the context in which soldiers and bureaucrats outlined specific policy options and in which cabinet members adopted certain recommendations and passed over others. The Sarraut cabinet...evaluated risks rationally. It made choices based on a panoply of real world interests."[107]

During the 1938 crisis, the British government believed that the majority of the British public was eager to stand up to Hitler. In March 1938, for example, the Cabinet noted that among the British public "there was an underlying resentment at the idea of constantly having to knuckle under to the Dictators for lack of sufficient strength."[108] The French foreign ministry similarly believed, based on increasing sentiment in the British press and the House of Commons "in favor of a more active policy in Europe," that "isolationism has received, as a result of the events in Austria, a serious blow" in Great Britain.[109] Reflecting changing public and parliamentary attitudes toward Germany, a large faction of the Conservative caucus in the House of Commons, including Churchill, was considering breaking from the government over its Czech policy.[110] Although large segments of the British and French public cheered the Munich agreement for avoiding war then, attitudes during the crisis were more demanding and could have supported preventive action.

Public opposition and democratic institutions, therefore, provide neither necessary nor sufficient explanations for French or British behavior in either crisis. These factors were not necessary for French passivity because the absence of British military support would have constrained France even if public opinion had supported military action. They were not sufficient for

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[107] Schuker, "France and the Remilitarization of the Rhineland," 334.

[108] Cabinet 15 (38), March 22, 1938, CAB 23/93, 40. See also Cabinet 13 (38), 14 March 1938, CAB 23/92, 364, which indicates that the government felt popular pressure to demonstrate the resolution to stand up to Hitler's challenges.

[109] Corbin to MAE, 16 March 1938, Tchécoslovaquie, MAE, Correspondance Politique et Commerciale, 1918–1940, vol. 152, 4. Moreover, when the majority of the British public rallied to support Chamberlain's 24 March Parliamentary declaration on Czechoslovakia cautioning Germany against further action, Corbin judged, based on editorials and letters to the editor in the British press, that they did so "on the condition that Mr. Chamberlain would not stop at words, but would translate his speech into action," particularly "the acceleration and development of the rearmament program." He further noted that a growing proportion of British public opinion began to support Churchill's call for a firm continental alliance against Hitler. Corbin to MAE, 29 March 1938, Grande Bretagne, MAE, Correspondance Politique et Commerciale, 1918–1940, vol. 278, 91–93. Therefore, Chamberlain's claims in bilateral talks that British public opinion supported appeasement were not credible for the French.

[110] Corbin to Paul-Boncour, 17 March 1938, Grande Bretagne, MAE, Correspondance Politique et Commerciale, 1918–1940, vol. 277, 112; Neville Thompson, *The Anti-Appeasers: Conservative Opposition to Appeasement in the 1930s* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1971).

French inaction because assurances of British military support would probably have led French leaders to use force against Germany.

While an anti-war public contributed to the British refusal to support France in 1936, the belief of British leaders that it was already too late and that Germany was already too strong would have precluded military action, even if public opinion had supported such action. Indeed, that was precisely the case in 1938. Thus public opposition to war, while reinforcing British policy against war, was not necessary for the absence of war in either crisis.

We would also argue that public opposition to war in Britain was probably not a sufficient condition for British inaction. British leaders, given their perceptions of the rise of German military power and the threat it posed to Britain, would have seriously considered joining France in a preventively motivated war against Germany, despite public reluctance, if they had been confident that rearmament had progressed to the point that Britain was ready for war against Germany and that, especially in 1938, the RAF could protect British cities from German bombers.

This is not to say, however, that an anti-war public opinion was insignificant in explaining the absence of a military response to the rise of Germany in the 1930s. Domestic pressures were important, but their impact was felt earlier in the causal chain. Western war-weariness after World War I led to public pacifism that contributed—along with economic factors—to extensive reductions in armaments.[111] This lowered the threshold that Hitler's rearmament program would have to cross, and created a situation in which a modest German effort could have a dramatic effect on the balance of power. Pervasive anti-war attitudes in France also encouraged military doctrines and force postures that limited the capacity for offensive military operations.[112] Public pacifism, consequently, contributed indirectly to the Western democracies' irresolution because it contributed to the shortage of military resources available to confront Germany.

Recently, scholars have constructed alternative domestic political explanations of the absence of balancing during the 1930s. Mark Haas, for example, argues that the international alignment preferences of key political groups in both Britain and France reflected their ideological orientations.[113] He claims that conservatives in both countries preferred the fascists to the Bolsheviks and, for that reason, favored a policy of appeasing Germany in

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[111] Schweller, "Domestic Structure and Preventive War"; Shay, *British Rearmament in the Thirties*.

[112] Emmerson reverses the causal arrow and traces French anti-war sentiment to France's defensive doctrine. He claims that the French public felt the Maginot line protected them from German aggression, therefore, their government did not need to wage war against Germany over the Rhineland. Emmerson, *The Rhineland Crisis*, 117.

[113] Haas, *Ideological Origins of Great Power Politics*. The theoretical argument is that political elites view ideologically similar groups in other countries as their natural allies and ideologically hostile groups as their natural enemies, in terms of advancing both the security of their own state and their own partisan political interests.

order to facilitate balancing against the Soviet Union, which they viewed as a more serious threat both to national security and their domestic political, economic, and social agendas.

Our study casts considerable doubt on this interpretation of events. Whatever the domestic divisions in France, it is clear that the prime minister and the military establishment identified Germany, and not the Soviet Union, as the primary threat. They would have gone to war with Germany, probably in 1936 and almost certainly in 1938, if they had been able to secure British support. Similarly, since 1933, British defense planning and Cabinet discussions consistently treated Germany as the primary and most threatening adversary and did not evince any greater sympathy for Hitler than for Stalin. What held Chamberlain and others back was not ideological constraints but rather the belief that Britain would be better prepared for war later rather than sooner.

Kevin Narizny focuses on sectoral and class (rather than ideological) interests, tracing appeasement to the economic and political interests of the Conservative Party.[114] The party was closely tied to the City of London's financial district, which objected to the economic costs of rearmament and which would be hurt by an escalation in international tensions. Conservatives also feared the political costs of the increased taxation that would be needed to finance rearmament, and the long term costs of inflation that would result from any attempt to finance rearmament through borrowing.

Narizny is correct to emphasize the importance of economic interests, as it is certainly true that Chamberlain's preference for appeasement over vigorous rearmament reflected his concern that too rapid a pace of rearmament would hurt the economy. Narizny gives too much emphasis, though, to sectoral interests and too little emphasis to the strategic economic interests of the state, particularly the fear (central to Chamberlain but shared by others as well) that too rapid a pace of rearmament would threaten economic stability and growth and in the process, undermine Britain's future military potential, especially its ability to sustain a lengthy war against Germany.[115] In addition, Narizny's argument that British conservative leaders perceived little threat from Nazi Germany and believed that Britain could tolerate German gains in central and eastern Europe is clearly at odds with the Cabinet minutes and private papers that we analyzed.[116] Finally, Narizny's sectoral argument has

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[114] Kevin Narizny, "Both Guns and Butter, or Neither: Class Interests in the Political Economy of Rearmament," *American Political Science Review*, 97, no. 2 (May 2003): 203–20. Narizny's general theoretical argument is that in the face of external security threats, conservative governments are more likely than labor governments to adopt policies of alliances or appeasement than of armaments. These governments and their class-based coalitions differ in their willingness to raise taxes, tolerate monetary instability, institute economic controls, and regulate industrial mobilization.

[115] Ripsman and Levy, "The Realism of Appeasement."

[116] A similar critique applies to the sectoral explanation offered by Lobell, who interprets British foreign policy in the 1930s as the product of the struggle between an internationalist coalition committed

trouble explaining why Chamberlain abandoned his economic restraint after the Sudeten crisis and gave priority to rearmament.

Schweller advances a neoclassical realist model that explains under-balancing in terms of four key domestic variables: elite consensus and cohesion (which explain the state's willingness to balance), and government or regime vulnerability and social cohesion (which explain the state's ability to extract resources from society to support a balancing strategy).[117] Schweller argues, therefore, that the key to understanding British and French foreign policies in the 1930s is the "tradeoffs between internal stability and external security." The political leaders of both states, he contends, gave priority to internal stability over enhanced external security. In his view, British leaders feared social unrest and they worried that rearmament would trigger an inflationary spiral and a financial crisis like that of the Great Depression; therefore, British leaders adopted appeasement as the best strategy to maintain the domestic status quo. He characterizes French elites as divided on the nature of the external threat and claims that their response to Germany was characterized by an "incoherent series of half measures and indecisive muddling through."[118]

Schweller's account cannot adequately explain British reluctance to opt for a preventively motivated war in these crises. The British did not avoid war in 1936 or 1938 to maintain domestic stability; they did so because they believed they lacked the available military means to counter German power at the time. With respect to France, Schweller shares the same problem as Haas and Narizny; characterizations of domestic divisions cannot account for the fact that despite internal political and economic constraints, France would have gone to war with Germany, probably in 1936 and almost certainly in 1938, if Britain had been willing to go along.

Finally, we need to qualify the argument that preoccupation with a broader economic crisis caused the underbalancing of the 1930s. Certainly, economic disarray, the instability of the franc, and the fear that the French treasury might collapse contributed to underfunding of the French military. Moreover, the perpetual economic crisis in France helped fuel French governmental instability, which caused numerous governments to collapse and led to weak governments without either the parliamentary support or the self-confidence to tackle major international challenges without allied support.

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to balanced budgets, limited military spending, collective security, and appeasement, and a nationalist coalition committed to protection from foreign competition, greater military preparedness, and empire. The internationalist bloc was able to resist economic nationalists' calls for massive rearmament until 1936. Steven E. Lobell, "Politics and National Security: The Battles for Britain," *Conflict Management and Peace Science* 21, no. 4 (2004): 269–86.

[117] Schweller, *Unanswered Threats*.
[118] Ibid.

Nevertheless, the constant economic crisis was part of the political background to the crisis, rather than the main engine behind the French policy of retreat. When the crisis arose, French decision makers found the inadequacy of the French military and the absence of support from Great Britain to be far more relevant than the ever-present interwar economic woes. The evidence suggests that, with British support, they would have waged war with Germany despite domestic instability. Indeed, when justifying their inaction in their memoirs after World War II—when their policies were universally condemned and they had powerful incentives to clear their names—the central figures in the British and French governments during the Rhineland crisis did not make any reference to economic constraints.[119] We believe, therefore, that economic constraints were not a sufficient condition for British or French inaction.

CONCLUSIONS

The theory of "preventive war" suggests that states in relative decline often respond with military force in an attempt to limit the rising adversary's strength before it achieves a position of superiority or crosses a critical threshold of military power. A military response is most likely when the leaders of the declining state perceive that the adversary's rise is inexorable, the power transition will result in a substantial advantage for the adversary, the adversary is implacably hostile, and the adversary engages in highly provocative actions that provide a rationale for a military response. In conventional interpretations of European diplomacy in the 1930s, all of these conditions were present, particularly during the crises over the Rhineland and the Sudetenland, making this a most likely case for the theory. The theory would have predicted that France, alone or in conjunction with Britain, would wage war to defeat Hitler's Germany while the opportunity was still available. The fact that France and Britain appeased a rising Germany, instead of pursuing a preventive strategy, would appear to be a major empirical anomaly in the theory of preventive war. Our aim in this paper has been to explain this anomaly.

Conventional explanations do not provide an adequate explanation for the passive British and French response to the rise of Germany. We have shown that by 1936, contrary to the conventional wisdom, neither British nor French leaders had any illusions about the nature of the German threat, the likelihood of war, nor the effectiveness of appeasement in limiting Hitler's territorial ambitions. Nor were political leaders constrained by a normative belief in the legitimacy of German demands. In addition, although pacifist public opinion, domestic institutional constraints, and the persistent economic

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[119] Ripsman and Blanchard, "Commercial Liberalism Under Fire."

crisis of the 1930s may have, at times, contributed to the reluctance of leaders to use force, they were neither necessary nor sufficient explanations for French or British behavior in either the Rhineland crisis or the Sudeten crisis.

Instead, both British and French decision making revolved primarily around strategic balance-of-power considerations. French leaders saw the rise of German military power as a major threat. They were willing to confront Germany militarily, but only with British support, given that they lacked the military capability to act independently. When it became clear that British assistance was not forthcoming, they switched to a policy of appeasement. For the British, the overriding concern during both crises was their perception that Germany had already surpassed British military capability, particularly in the air, and that a serious British rearmament effort was necessary to redress that imbalance.

In other words, because of French military disarray, British support was a necessary condition for France to go to war against Germany in each of the Rhineland and Sudeten crises. Given French threat perceptions and preferences, British support would have been a sufficient condition for war in 1938 and it probably would have led to a military confrontation in 1936. British perceptions that the balance had already shifted in Germany's favor and the belief that the British rearmament program would help restore a favorable balance of power within a few years were jointly sufficient for British inaction, and therefore for the absence of a preventively motivated war against Germany by either Britain or France.

We conclude, then, that the British and French failure to take military action against a rising Germany in the mid-to-late 1930s does not violate hypotheses on preventive war. In addition, our empirical study reveals that our earlier characterization of the 1936 and 1938 crises as the most likely cases for the theory was not correctly specified.[120] The policy preferences of French leaders were in fact quite consistent with preventive logic. The French perceived a rising and implacably hostile Germany. They believed that time favored the adversary, accepted the better-now-than-later logic, and (with some internal dissent) favored a strategy of prevention, but only if they had British support. They failed to act only because British leaders refused to cooperate.

French behavior is thus consistent with several of the hypotheses on prevention articulated above. First, if political leaders do not expect they can emerge victorious with tolerable costs, they are unlikely to initiate such a war. Second, states are less likely to fight against a strong adversary if they do not

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[120] An important function of case studies, especially those based on most/least likely and deviant case designs, is to provide detailed measurements of key variables—here perceptions of the current and future distribution of military capabilities—and in doing so either refute or validate the hypothesized most/least likely characterization of the case or explain why the case was deviant.

have the support of a vital ally. Third, French leaders, who perceived a more imminent threat than did British leaders and who were more convinced that time was on the side of their adversary, were more eager for war than the British Government.

For Britain, the fundamental premise of preventive logic did not apply. The preventive motivation for war derives from perceptions of a rising adversary, the belief that time is on the side of the adversary, and the fear of the consequences, which generate a better-now-than-later logic. In the 1930s, however, British leaders believe that while things would get worse in the short term, in the intermediate term time was on their side, not the adversary's. Consequently, the British logic was better later than now.

British behavior is also consistent with our earlier theoretical emphasis on the importance of third states in decisions for "preventive war." A state facing a rising adversary is less inclined to undertake military action if it faces other significant threats. For Britain, additional threats came from Japan in the Far East and possibly Italy in the Mediterranean. This led many British officials to believe that they already had "too many enemies" to take on Germany as well.[121] France was also concerned about a potential naval confrontation with Italy in the Mediterranean, but that was secondary to the more likely and more potent threat from Germany. Our analysis, therefore, "saves" the theory of preventive war from a potentially damaging case.

We have focused on the theoretical question of preventive war and its absence in the 1930s, but our study has some important implications for the broader phenomenon of balancing. In the last decade we have seen a number of challenges to the classic balance of power hypothesis that states tend to balance against either the strongest power or the greatest threat. Too often, however, balancing is defined as one of several alternative strategies that states might pursue: others being appeasement, hiding, and buck-passing. This is misleading. Appeasement and balancing can be complementary strategies. The British used appeasement to buy time for a rearmament program to prepare for a war with Germany that they believed to be virtually inevitable. France sought to pacify Great Britain in order to maintain the firm alliance commitment they would need for the inevitable clash with Germany. One implication of this study is that scholars need to give more attention to the various sub-strategies, and combinations of them, through which states pursue a larger strategy of balancing against a threatening adversary.[122]

Another implication is that British and French behavior in the 1930s is also consistent with realist theory more broadly.[123] Scholars have typically

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[121] Schuker, "France and the Remilitarization of the Rhineland," 312–13.

[122] In doing so, scholars must avoid the trap of defining balancing so broadly that everything fits into balancing, which would leave us with non-falsifiable hypotheses.

[123] We develop this point more fully in Ripsman and Levy, "The Realism of Appeasement."

viewed appeasement as a rejection of balance of power logic by British and French leaders. As a result, realists have largely abdicated their role in explaining appeasement, blaming it on the naiveté of Western leaders, pacifist populations, or domestic political constraints on policy. As we demonstrate, however, with their perception of the balance of power—however flawed it may have been—their concern for their own military weakness, and the lack of available allies, appeasement as a complement to rearmament was quite consistent with realist principles.[124]

Let us conclude by returning to the role of domestic politics. These are just two cases, of course, but the preferences and behavior of British and French leaders do not support the logic underlying the hypothesis that democracies are averse to preventive strategies. The factors accounting for the non-war outcomes in the 1936 and 1938 crises have little to do with democracy. Given the economic and military strength of the relevant parties in 1936 and in 1938, there is little reason to believe that the outcome would have been different if France and Britain had not been democratic states.

Having said this, we must emphasize that we have focused on decision making during two specific international crises, not on the period that led up to the crisis and helped shape the military, economic, and political context of the crisis. There is good reason to believe that while domestic pressures did not play a dominant role in the 1936 and 1938 crises, they played a much more important role in the previous decade. Domestic politics and attitudes contributed significantly to the weakening of the British and French military establishments after World War I, which created a situation that allowed Germany to surpass the Western powers in military strength within a few years with a relatively modest effort. Secondarily, domestic factors also contributed to the development of a French military doctrine and strategy that left the government few options for offensive operations by the mid-1930s. This means that a complete explanation for British and French passivity in response to the rise of German power must ultimately include developments in the previous decade that helped shape constraints and strategic calculations in subsequent crises.[125]

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[124] Moreover, there are other plausible alternative realist explanations that could be advanced, although we found only limited support for them in the decision-making documents. In particular, if economic motivations were to have been more important in British and French calculations than we conclude, a decision to avoid war until the country could sustain one economically would also be consistent with the considerations of material power that underlie realism.

[125] We explore this question in Norrin Ripsman and Jack S. Levy, "Threat Perception and Preventive War: The Non-Response to Nazi Germany, 1933–1936" (paper, American Political Science Association annual meeting, 30 August–2 September 2007).