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Before the outbreak of the COVID pandemic a year ago, one of the biggest topics of discussion dominating the US government and major US news outlets was the rise of China on the international stage and its supposed collision course with the United States in what many endorse as Thucydides' Trap. This confrontation has not gone away. As tensions flare with the exchange of political rhetoric between the United States and China about the origins of COVID, near-misses between Chinese and US military vessels in the South China Sea, and the status of Taiwan, curiosity abounds for what the future holds for the two biggest powers of the world. This analysis suggests continued examination of US-Sino tensions utilizing the concept of preemption as a new point of approach. Preemption--the right of self-defense--brings a needed look at US-Sino tensions today. This focus on preemption can help, when addressed in a careful manner, chastise the push for war and offer a better examination of US actions in the Pacific than the too rigid belief in the historical analogy, Thucydides' Trap, where a rising power will inevitably go to war against the established power.

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MASTER OF MILITARY STUDIES

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SUBMITTED IN PARTIAL FULFILLMENT
OF THE REQUIREMENTS FOR THE DEGREE OF
MASTER OF MILITARY STUDIES

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Executive Summary

Title: Conventional Preemption: A Needed Lens to Address War With China?

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Thesis: To weigh preemption as a US counter to Chinese actions in the Pacific puts the idea of war foremost in the analysis of current US-Sino tensions. This focus on preemption can help, when addressed in a careful manner, chastise the push for war and offer a better examination of US actions in the Pacific than the too rigid belief in the historical analogy presented in Thucydides' Trap where a rising power will inevitably go to war against the established power.

Discussion: The rise of the People's Republic of China (PRC) on the international stage has created tensions between China and the current world superpower, the United States of America. With tensions flaring as a result of political rhetoric, near-misses between US and Chinese vessels in the South China Sea, and US and Chinese national strategies appearing increasingly at odds, the resulting question becomes what will happen next. Many academics and pundits alike agree with Graham Allison's endorsement of the concept of Thucydides' Trap where a US-Sino war is inevitable. However, little has been written to investigate the US-Sino conflict through the lens of preemption—the concept of a country striking another first in self-defense, a logical step should Allison's fear prove correct. This study explores the US-Sino situation through the lens of conventional preemption in order to add a new perspective to this US-Sino discussion and illuminate whether or not the United States has a valid case for preemptive action towards China, what US conventional preemption might look like, the potential fallout if the United States and China enter into a war, and whether war between these two great powers is actually an inevitability or if there are alternatives to avoid a US-Sino war altogether.

Conclusion: A US preemptive attack on China does not appear to be appropriate. While China clearly desires a multipolar world and to compete with the United States as a great power, its current national actions, up to today, have not directly threatened an imminent and overwhelming attack on the United States. China has not endangered US national integrity nor has it put the United States in a position of fear where it felt like it had no time or other recourse to respond to Chinese actions. This view of the limited utility of conventional preemption also means one should not accept Allison's fears of the coming war. China's actions are not as threatening as imagined, nor has the United States not responded. Two great powers are certainly finding their footing in relation to one another, but there is space to defuse tensions and, certainly, that opening means a very limited need to resort to preemption. This conclusion is good news given the risks of acting preemptively. Now comes the hard work of keeping things short of the act of war to keep the need for preemption as marginal.

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Preface

With the United States' pivot to the Indo-Pacific and focus on the People's Republic of China, I became very curious about how the United States planned to address the rise of China. Mainstream news broadcasts and articles presented a picture of China's growth and capability as if it were right on the heels of the United States. This, of course, caused me great concern and surprise as a service member and an American. My almost 16 years of service has focused on the Middle East, Europe, and Africa. China was not on my radar until it became a topic of conversation in mainstream media as well as wargames and planning exercises conducted by 1st Marine Division under which my last unit served. After arriving to Command and Staff, working through the master's program guidance and perusing faculty areas of expertise, I found myself drawn to the idea of preemption. If China is threatening the country that I love and challenging US status as the single world superpower, I, like many American citizens and military professionals, gravitate to the general idea of executing a decisive military operation that could put China back in its place and preserve the American way of life. However, through my in-depth research and under the mentorship of Dr. Matthew Flynn and LtCol Joern Qviller, I have quickly realized that my pipe dream of an easy first strike option to solve the "China problem" was naive. While preemption, and the idea of striking a threat first – ostensibly in self-defense -- before it strikes you, looks great in the movies and titillates the senses, the last 200 years of history proves that preemption rarely achieves positive results, often creates a much larger and unnecessary conflict, and habitually serves as an excuse for an aggressor nation to attack another country under false pretenses and often only for self-gain instead of self-defense. If war between the United States and China is imminent or even just possible, the United States must consider all of its options to address the threat. Preemption puts war at the forefront of the discussion and the United States cannot afford to ignore it as an option. My research and analysis of a possible US-Sino conflict through the lens of preemption reveals many challenges should the US choose that option. It also reveals weakness in the Thucydides' Trap claim and further highlights the imperative of defusing US-Sino tensions and finding a better alternative than war for the time being.

Throughout the course of my research and thesis development, I have truly benefitted from a wonderful support and mentorship network. I must thank my parents, Bill and Mary Rogers, and my son, Chris, for motivation and continued encouragement. I would also like to acknowledge Dr. Matthew Flynn and LtCol Jøern Qviller, for their mentorship and honest, constructive feedback throughout the process, which improved and strengthened my work.

Introduction

Before the outbreak of the COVID pandemic a year ago, one of the biggest topics of discussion dominating the halls of the Pentagon, the White House, congressional committees on Capitol Hill, and major US news outlets was the rise of the People’s Republic of China (PRC) on the international stage and its supposed collision course with the current world superpower, the United States of America. This confrontation has not gone away. At best, COVID has merely deferred the menacing posturing between the two states. More likely, COVID has added to the tensions—China did little to warn the world of the outbreak. As tensions flare with the exchange of political rhetoric from both sides about the origins of COVID, the possibility of more flash points coming from near-misses between Chinese and US military vessels in the South China Sea unsettle relations, as does shared boisterous rhetoric about the status of Taiwan. Curiosity abounds for what the future holds for the two biggest powers of the world. The dynamic of the rise and fall of great powers also impacts this discussion and adds to the tensions, with the United States playing the role of established power hoping to hold off a challenger. That scenario in some minds reaches to a Greek antecedent, the clash of Sparta and Athens, again pointing to the inevitability of a US-Sino conflict. The analysis that follows suggests a continued examination of US-Sino tensions with a new approach, preemption. Here, an old concept—the right of self-defense—set in more recent times given US justification of the 2003 action against Iraq, but now neglected if not forgotten, brings a needed look at US-Sino tensions today. Given how different the calculus is when considering the use of nuclear weapons as part of preemption, the scope of this study purposefully focuses solely on non-nuclear, conventional preemption. To weigh this US counter to Chinese actions in the Pacific that are resonating globally puts the idea of war foremost in the analysis. This focus on preemption can help, when addressed in a careful manner, chastise the push for war and offer a better examination of US actions in the Pacific than

the too rigid belief in the historical analogy presented in Thucydides' Trap where a rising power will go to war against the established power.

A great deal of literature today attempts to explain the current and future state of a Sino-US great power conflict. With the potential for conflict with China in the future, the United States must consider a preemptive strike on China. To determine the feasibility of such an option, this analysis explores the existing literature surrounding the national defense strategies of the United States and China, dialogue for and against Graham Allison's concept of inevitable war and Thucydides' Trap, what authors' currently say about the costs and benefits of preemption, an exploration of a possible US preemptive strike of China, and the potential consequences of a US-Sino war. While the use of nuclear weapons could certainly fall under the concept of preemption, this study focus

Existing Literature

China's National Defense Strategy

The national defense strategies (NDS) of both the United States and China show consensus that the world is changing, global disorder is increasing, and both countries blame one another for the international security situation becoming increasingly destabilized. China's 2019 NDS, entitled *China's National Defense in the New Era*, states that China is reacting to the destabilizing international security environment caused by US hegemonic, unilateral policies.¹ It further states that the United States "significantly increased its defense expenditure, pushed for additional capacity in nuclear, outer space, cyber and missile defense, and undermined global strategic stability," which "provoked and intensified competition among major countries."² China set benchmarks for strengthening its national military through complete modernization by 2035 to possess "world-class forces by the mid-21st century," just in time for the 100 year anniversary of the founding of the PRC.³ In addition to building military power, China states

that reunification of Taiwan with mainland China is a top priority, and that it “resolutely opposes the wrong practices and provocative activities of the US side regarding arms sales to Taiwan, sanctions on the CMC [Central Military Commission] Equipment Development Department and its leadership, illegal entry into China’s territorial waters and maritime and air spaces near relevant islands and reefs, and wide and frequent close-in reconnaissance.”⁴

United States’ National Defense Strategy

The 2018 US NDS depicts a much different cause of the deteriorating situation than what the Chinese NDS conveys. The US NDS states that “China is leveraging military modernization, influence operations, and predatory economics...to reorder the Indo-Pacific region to their advantage. As China continues its economic and military ascendance, it will continue to pursue a military modernization program that seeks...regional hegemony...and displacement of the United States to achieve global preeminence in the future.”⁵ As a result, the US NDS states that it will conduct “a transformation of how the Department conducts business” by prioritizing defense objectives that include “detering adversaries from aggression against [US] vital interests; [m]aintaining favorable regional balances of power in the Indo-Pacific...[and] [e]nsuring common domains remain open and free.”⁶ The US Department of Defense’s military pivot to the Indo-Pacific region occurred to address these objectives and what the Secretary of Defense describes as China’s “magnitude of threats...and the potential for those threats to increase in the future.”⁷

Thucydides’ Trap

As both countries’ NDSs show, tensions exist between the United States and China. Graham Allison, Harvard Scholar and author of *Destined for War: Can America and China Escape Thucydides’s Trap?*, endorsed the concept of the Thucydides’ Trap to describe what he sees as an alarming situation developing between the United States and the PRC today. Allison

claims that the United States and China are on a collision course for war for the same reason that hegemon Sparta and rising challenger Athens fought against each other in the Peloponnesian War in 5th century BCE. Allison quotes Thucydides, the ancient Athenian historian and Corinthian ambassador, to describe the cause of the war when he writes, “It was the rise of Athens and the fear that this instilled in Sparta that made war inevitable.”⁸ To show China’s power position relative to the United States, Allison uses gross domestic product (GDP) and purchasing power parity (PPP) figures to show that China is not only gaining on the United States, but perhaps has already surpassed the United States’ in power position. Graham also uses case studies of 16 conflicts over the past 500 years that have occurred between an incumbent hegemon and a rising power where 12 resulted in war. Graham argues that the rise of China as an international power, its challenge to US hegemony, and the fear that this makes the United States feel, make a Sino-US war highly probable unless both countries make “huge, painful adjustments in attitude and actions” to avoid conflict.⁹ John Mearsheimer, author of *The Gathering Storm: China’s Challenge to US Power in Asia*, reinforces Allison’s assessment that chances of conflict between the United States and China are high when he wrote in 2010 that, “Australians should be worried about China’s rise because it is likely to lead to an intense security competition between China and the United States, with considerable potential for war.”¹⁰ He goes on to endorse the very analogy Allison points to when he overtly states that “China cannot rise peacefully.”¹¹

While many authors agree with Allison’s assessment, dissenting authors question the metrics that Allison uses to support his claim that there is a high probability of war between the United States and China. David C. Kang and Xinru Ma, authors of the article, “Power Transitions: Thucydides Didn’t Live in East Asia,” claim that Allison’s case study selections focused almost entirely on the history of conflict between European countries and the history of

the Peloponnesian War. Kang and Ma state that using these case studies to draw conclusions on how Asia would behave is biased, and may not be effective due to the differences in culture and mindsets.¹² Simply put, China may not think or act like European countries of the past, and its behavior is not assured to result in war with the United States as Allison would have people believe. Furthermore, Michael Beckley, author of “The Power of Nations: Measuring What Matters,” disagrees with Graham Allison’s attempt to use GDP and PPP to show that China is close or already ahead of the United States regarding national power. Beckley states that these assessments “have shaped public opinion and government policy” to see China as pulling ahead of the United States.¹³ Beckley goes on to write, “[t]he hype about China’s rise, however, has been based largely on gross indicators that ignore costs. When costs are accounted for, it becomes clear that the United States’ economic and military lead over China is much larger than typically assumed—and the trends are mostly in America’s favor.”¹⁴ If the United States uses Beckley’s net power resources model to measure national power, the United States should not fear China because the United States remains far ahead in most metrics. Lastly, Alan Greeley Misenheimer, author of *Thucydides’ Other “Traps”: The United States, China, and the Prospect of “Inevitable” War*, criticizes Allison’s inevitable war concept when he writes, “From an analytical standpoint, the Thucydides’ Trap fallaciously presumes to take local, idiosyncratic circumstances and elevate them to the level of eternal principle...that compulsion is narrowly and specifically cited as existing between *those* two Greek city-states [Sparta and Athens] at *that* time, under the influence of particular, specified circumstances.”¹⁵ Misenheimer’s complaint, much like Kang’s and Ma’s, is that Allison oversimplifies the application of Thucydides’ Trap onto future wars, and he fails to consider appropriate historical and cultural context that led to wars in the past.¹⁶

Preemption

Despite the pushback to Allison, the US military, in accordance with the NSS and NDS, continues to contemplate a clash with China. While much has been written about a US-Sino conflict through the lens of Thucydides' Trap, little has been written regarding the potential for an American or Chinese act of preemption as a means to win an inevitable war. Matthew Flynn, author of *First Strike: Preemptive War in Modern History*, defines preemptive warfare as “the practice of attempting to avoid an enemy’s seemingly imminent attack by taking military action against them first. It is undertaken in self-defense...[and] thought to be justified and honorable.”¹⁷ Utilizing the American Civil War as one example, Flynn writes that, “[t]he Confederacy during the American Civil War looked to fight a war sooner than later, convinced that conflict [with the Union] was inevitable due to the ponderous presence of its hostile neighbor. Why not decide the timing of that war? Delay accomplished nothing; if anything, the disparity in strength between North and South would increase over time, and Southern defeat would be certain.”¹⁸

Flynn’s effort sets the stage to evaluate preemption as a tool that countries utilize when facing war, but then stressed that there is significant disagreement among authors regarding the legality of one country taking preemptive action towards another. According to Michael Doyle, former assistant secretary general of the United Nations, and Stephen Macedo, both authors of *Striking First: Preemption and Prevention in International Conflict*, international law explains preemptive war as a “response to a threat of attack that is not only overwhelming but also so imminent as to allow no time for deliberation and no choice of means.”¹⁹ While the current situation between the United States and China may not yet meet this criteria, Doyle believes that the current international rules governing the authorization for preemption are too constraining and unrealistic given the current nature of security threats facing countries. He further asserts

that if one country has to wait for another country to prepare and position itself to overwhelm another country, the waiting country may have lost the opportunity to defend itself and effectively repel its attacker.²⁰ In this respect, preemption fades in favor of preventative war or not waiting until a foe can overwhelm a state.

As with the question of legality, there is also disagreement regarding the morality of preemptive war. Flynn again weighs in when he asserts that preemptive warfare could be considered just or moral because delivering the first strike “preserves one’s national integrity and can be thought of as an act of self-defense.”²¹ Due to the act stemming from a tremendous fear of being attacked, a preemptive attacker can start a war and still claim the moral high ground without being labeled by the international community as an aggressor.²² Because the preemptor is morally justified, other countries can ally with the preempting country, and potentially assist in isolating the aggressor country, which applies even more pressure on the aggressor and achieves more effective results. Although Flynn clearly demonstrates, utilizing his analysis of the Israeli Six Day War, that a historical precedent exists to prove that preemption can be moral, Flynn is quick to note that historical case studies also reveal that truly ‘just’ preemption is uncommon, and that the claim of preemption is often used by aggressor nations as a cover to attack other nations unnecessarily for self-gain.²³

Unlike issues of legality and morality, consensus seems to exist among authors regarding the vast majority of outcomes of preemptive war. Both Flynn and Alan Dershowitz, author of *Preemption: A Knife That Cuts Both Ways*, assess the Israeli Six Day War as a success in achieving its preemptive strike objective of defending itself against the buildup of military forces and overt threats from its Egyptian neighbor. However, Dershowitz notes in his book that “there is always the possibility that firing the first shot—even on the basis of the best intelligence and with the highest of motives—may turn out to provoke a war that would not otherwise have

begun.”²⁴ Dershowitz seems to show that while positive outcomes can result from preemptive strikes, these same preemptive strikes could just as easily have resulted in unexpected, negative outcomes where a limited objective preemption fails to remain limited, and rapidly escalates into a large-scale war. Flynn’s historical case studies of preemptive war reinforce Dershowitz’ warning. Japan’s preemptive attack on Pearl Harbor did not achieve a quick Japanese victory over the United States. German preemption during WWII resulted in a prolonged war that devastated Germany and much of Europe without achieving German victory. Lastly, the United States’ preemptive attack on Saddam Hussein’s Iraq in 2003 also failed to achieve a quick victory for the United States or defeat global terrorism. According to Dr. Flynn, “[t]he dependency on war, justified as preemption, has harmed American interests. Allies have been alienated, possible alliances thwarted by a unilaterally acting United States.”²⁵

As the available literature and analyses show, the national interests of China and the United States appear aggressively at odds and the two nations ripe for conflict. There appears to be some validity in the prospect of both countries falling prey to Thucydides’ Trap, and the United States must begin considering its options to address this potential for a US-Sino conflict. The possibility of preemption against China is an option that the United States must, at minimum, consider given fear of a pending war. The question that the United States must answer, and that this MMS hopes to inform, is if a US preemptive strike on a rising China today would be legal, moral, and result in a positive outcome. The United States must honestly and thoroughly discuss its options to avoid simply adding another chapter to a lengthy history of aggressive countries who ultimately failed in their attempts to further their national interests under the guise of “self-defense” from what they argue is an imminent threat.

Analysis of a Possible US Preemption of China

Concerning Chinese Activities

Many Chinese activities occurring within and outside of China's borders rightfully increase US concern about China's long-term objectives and their impacts to US interests and security. One example is China's desired expansion into the western hemisphere that could enable future potential military objectives in and from the Caribbean. In December 2020, Dr. Lawrence A. Franklin, the former Iran Desk Officer for Secretary of Defense Rumsfeld, warned in his article, "Chinese Military Bases in The Caribbean?" that, "of more concern to US security interests is the ongoing seaport expansion project in the already commercially important port of Kingston, Jamaica, as well as the port at Freeport, Bahamas...China's possible new base of operations 90 miles off the US coast."²⁶ A fear created by Chinese investments in ports in the Caribbean, so close to the US mainland, is that a precedent already exists where Chinese creditors create "debt traps" by lending large amounts of revenue to foreign countries for port infrastructure modernization. When countries that borrow money cannot pay back their Chinese creditors, the port defaults to Chinese control. This same phenomenon occurred to the port of Hambantota in Sri Lanka, and the fear is that this could allow China to gain footholds in areas close to the US mainland as well.²⁷

In addition to Chinese expansion, China strengthening its ties with US adversaries also creates concern for the United States. Eric Jacobson, author of "Sino-Russian Convergence in the Military Domain," demonstrates Chinese and Russian empathy towards each other's views of the United States and their respective actions to deter US influence and interference. Jacobson states that "[b]oth Russia and China have developed their strategies around conflict with the United States and its allies...[and] both see the United States as their main competitor and are developing similar strategies to secure political objectives that fall below the threshold for U.S.

and allied conventional responses.”²⁸ Because China and Russia share a preference for a multipolar world order, they often partner together to mitigate US pressure tactics as evidenced by “jointly oppos[ing] U.S.-sponsored measures at the United Nations Security Council.”²⁹ After western powers sanctioned Russia for its illegal annexation of Crimea, China stepped in to prop up Russia’s economy through investments, which further proves their strengthening partnership.³⁰ In addition to strengthening ties with Russia, there is evidence that China is developing a major partnership with Iran through a bilateral deal worth, in US dollars, approximately \$400 billion.³¹ With US sanctions on Iran continuing to cripple the Iranian economy, China sees opportunity in Iran’s isolation. This deal would come with Chinese “investments in energy, infrastructure, telecommunications and the tech sector, as well as arms sales...[and] China gets a guaranteed supply of Iranian natural resources for a premium price for 25 years, and few impediments to its own strategic interests.”³² Unfortunately for the United States, gains for Iran often become gains for Iran-exported terrorism targeting the United States such as the indirect fire and rocket attacks on Iraqi military facilities that “killed a U.S. contractor and wounded four U.S. service members” in December 2019.³³ As China continues to invest in and strengthen relationships with these US adversaries, China’s regional and international influence grows, and often at the expense of US influence, national power, and national interests abroad.

In addition to China’s outward expansion and its strengthening of ties with US adversaries, China’s immense growth in its military capability also causes great concern for the United States. China intends to complete military modernization by 2035 and be a “world-class” fighting force by 2049 that possesses the capabilities equal to the United States and other global militaries.³⁴ According to Ian Williams and Masao Dahlgren’s article entitled, “More Than Missiles: China Previews its New Way of War,” China’s October 2019 military “parade

illustrated China’s prioritization of high-technology systems like electronic warfare, unmanned systems, and precision guided munitions. Such weaponry enhances China’s ability to impair U.S. forces from conducting complex military operations in much of the Asia-Pacific...[and] revealed a nation seeking to supplant the United States as the dominant military and technological power.”³⁵ If successful in its goals, Chinese military growth and modernization will progressively erode relative US military advantages and influence in the region. Should US influence in the Indo-Pacific wane, China is relatively free to further assert its will in the region at the expense of the United States and US allies.

Also concerning for US interests in the Indo-Pacific region is China’s continued militarization in the South China Sea. China continues to “plac[e] anti-ship cruise missiles and long-range surface-to-air missiles on outposts in the Spratly Islands, violating a 2015 pledge by Chinese President Xi Jinping that ‘China does not intend to pursue militarization’ of the Spratly Islands.”³⁶ This militarization in the South China Sea and Spratly Islands enables China to influence territory that does not belong to China, endanger international freedom of navigation rights at will, disrupt lucrative trade routes for international shipping, and facilitates a potential reunification of Taiwan with mainland China by military force in the future; all of these things the United States and its allies want to prevent. As the primary defender of the rules-based international order and a strong ally of countries impacted by these illegal and malign Chinese moves, the United States has a responsibility to confront China and deny their ability to break international law at the expense of sovereign nations.

In addition to China’s concerning militarization of the South China Sea, China’s change in mission for the Chinese People’s Liberation Army Navy (PLAN) also signals Chinese expansionist behavior. While the Chinese Navy has traditionally been concerned with China’s borders and areas immediately surrounding those borders, its reformed mission is now “a mix of

‘offshore waters defense’ and ‘open seas protection’” whereby China’s Navy will focus more on its increasing role overseas executing “a maritime strategy to defend [Chinese] interests abroad.”³⁷ With this change in mission for the PLAN and the growth in size of the Chinese Navy in personnel and military shipping, China improves its ability to project its military and power regionally and internationally. Should Chinese interests abroad conflict with those of the United States or allied nations, China’s development of its naval power projection enables it to assert itself by the threat or use of military force much like the United States does today. In the context of a US preemptive attack on China, this Chinese military power projection capability further complicates the US analysis of where to act as well as how and where the CCP might take reactive action.

A last example of concerning Chinese behavior impacting the United States involves Chinese-sponsored cyber and espionage incidents targeting US entities. The Center for Strategic & International Studies (CSIS) maintains a running log of world cyber incidents since 2006. In the last nine months alone, China has targeted the United States government and US private entities numerous times. As recent as October 2020, the US National Security Agency “warned that Chinese government hackers were targeting the U.S. defense industrial base as part of a wide-ranging espionage campaign.”³⁸ In September 2020, US Department of Justice “indicted five Chinese hackers with ties to Chinese intelligence services for attacks on more than 100 organizations across government, IT, social media, academia, and more.”³⁹ Also in September 2020, the US Cybersecurity and Infrastructure Security Agency “revealed that hackers associated with the Chinese Ministry of State Security had been scanning U.S. government and private networks for over a year in search of networking devices that could be compromised using exploits for recently discovered vulnerabilities.”⁴⁰ In May 2020, the United States believed that Chinese government-sponsored hackers tried to steal US coronavirus vaccine research as well.⁴¹

These cyber incidents are just a few of the many attempts made by China and those that China sponsors to gain access to US entities, records, and research.

As with Chinese cyber incidents, CSIS figures show a worrisome trend for Chinese espionage activities directed at the United States as well. Of the 152 publicly reported cases since 2000, CSIS could prove actor and intent that “45% of actors were Chinese military or government employees...30% were private Chinese citizens...33% involved non-Chinese actors (usually U.S. persons recruited by Chinese officials)...38% of incidents sought to acquire military technology...48% of incidents sought to acquire commercial technologies... [and] 14% of incidents sought to acquire information on U.S. civilian agencies or politicians.”⁴² The more troubling trend from the CSIS survey is the growth of Chinese espionage directed towards the United States as evidenced by 26% of the espionage cases occurring from 2000 to 2009 and 74% occurring from 2010 to 2020.⁴³ These figures clearly show an increase in Chinese espionage directed at the United States, which further add to US fears of Chinese aggression.

Given the increasing level of concern that these and other malign Chinese activities create for the United States and its allies regarding their national security and interests, the expectation and obligation for the United States to act grows. While the desire to act and protect US and ally interests in the region comes naturally as evidenced by US historical interventions in the region, determining how to act and how to rationalize a US response is the more challenging part. Much of China’s activity could be consider merely in parallel to past US and even European actions in the Pacific. Economic exploitation, espionage, and an arms buildup in that region may be warranted by China, a great power in the area, more so than the ‘foreign’ influence of the United States. Added to this comes Chinese activity beyond home waters reaching Africa and even Latin America. Again, one could say this expansion mirrors the American road to success since the late 19th century. The similarity heightens Allison’s critique

that great powers will collide. The parallels are striking. Yet, American efforts always struck a chord of inclusion among other nations. Even if these states provide valuable trading partners and in favor of US interests, the prospect of competition meant a fairer playing ground than that offered by China today. One can argue US follow through, but not the promise of inclusion. The point is, the United States can well be regarded as a welcomed presence in the region and certainly more so than China's offers of economic assistance that clearly speak to a means of control instead of inclusion in an international system. To continue this presence is the issue.

Assessing the Validity of US Preemption

In regard to preemption, the United States could attempt to construct a narrative to try to justify a US preemptive attack on or around China under the guise of self-protection and preservation of the rules-based international order. The narrative might focus on China partnering with dangerous, rogue states like Iran and North Korea that consistently threaten the destruction of the United States. China's own rhetoric in its NDS singles out the United States as its number one "competitor," and China's strong embrace of rogue US adversaries with "death to America" ideologies could take things one step further and strongly signal a Chinese alignment with their professed interests. China's strong partnership with Russia also signals China's active acceptance of Russia's illegal annexation of sovereign Crimean territory that goes against international law; this also alludes to China's disposition to violate or allow a partner nation to violate international law when it benefits Chinese goals. Without the financial backing of China, Russia's ability to break international law, influence US and allied interests, and annex more foreign territory would become limited. Additionally, China, Russia, and North Korea all possess nuclear weapon capabilities that can range US military bases, deployed military personnel, and US civilians living abroad. When nuclear weapons enter the picture, preemption becomes a more urgent question.

Although China's more expansionist actions, military growth, partnership choices, cyber warfare, and espionage activities certainly seem to validate the Thucydides' Trap, the United States still cannot execute a preemptive strike on China without answering several questions. The United States must answer whether these Chinese activities truly justify a US preemptive attack on China by international law. The United States must also figure out how to act preemptively without pulling itself and other countries into a larger, prolonged World War III scenario. Then the United States must decide where to strike to achieve limited objectives to mitigate further conflict with China. This willingness to go to war to limit a war is a hard ask of preemption. Lastly, the United States must ascertain when the right time is to strike given that China's capability and influence are rapidly achieving parity with the United States. Overall, the United States must ask what is gained from a preemptive strike in terms of averting a coming war, initiating a war that is coming anyway, or hoping to fight a limited war in lieu of a global conflagration. No matter the answers to these questions, Allison's fears of an inevitable war were never so clearly tied to the prospect of a preemptive strike.

In order to thoughtfully and appropriately determine an answer to these questions regarding resorting to preemption, the United States must look at the metrics proposed by some of its experts in the field of preemptive war to determine if it would be legally and morally justified. As such, it is worth restating here that for preemptive war to be legal by international standards, it has to be a "response to a threat of attack that is not only overwhelming but also so imminent as to allow no time for deliberation and no choice of means."⁴⁴ Additionally, Flynn reminds those who are considering preemptive war that it can only be considered moral when delivering the first strike "preserves one's national integrity and can be thought of as an act of self-defense."⁴⁵ Due to the act stemming from a tremendous fear of being attacked, a preemptive

attacker can start a war and still claim the moral high ground without being labeled by the international community as an aggressor.⁴⁶

Looking at Doyle's more detailed, proposed four standards model to determine if striking first would be justified, a US first strike on China appears to fall short. Doyle's four standards model is predicated on the rule that "[a]bsent good reasons relevant to each standard, action is not justified."⁴⁷ Doyle's four standards consist of lethality, likelihood, legitimacy, and legality. According to Doyle, "*lethality* identifies the likely loss of life if the threat is not eliminated... *likelihood* assesses the probability that the threat will occur... *legitimacy* covers the traditional just war criteria of proportionality, necessity, and deliberativeness of proposed responses... [and] *legality* asks whether the threatening situation is itself produced by legal or illegal actions, and whether the proposed remedy is more or less legal."⁴⁸ Regarding the first standard, lethality, the United States must assess the loss of life or other things of value if the United States does not stop China's threatening activities. Currently, the United States has not experienced any known loss of life due to China's actions. Therefore, the value of this standard is zero. The second of Doyle's standards, likelihood, forces the United States to determine how much it believes that a threat that the Chinese have made will occur. For this standard as well, China has not made threats of attacking the United States; only that it will certainly respond if attacked first. The value of this second standard is also zero as a result. For the third standard, legitimacy, in determining if a US first strike on China would be justified, the United States must consider relevant sub-elements: "(1) weighing proportionately the threatened harm against the likely benefit-cost of the response... [and] (2) limiting the response to the minimum necessary to effectively deal with the threat."⁴⁹ In this context, a US military strike on China when China has not attacked or threatened a military attack of its own on the United States would appear to be disproportionate. Additionally, if the United States were to respond militarily to real or

perceived Chinese transgressions that are not of a military nature, the US first strike would appear more like an overly aggressive escalation of hostilities. Furthermore, a limited objective first strike by the United States would not likely stop all of China's aforementioned activities. The last of Doyle's four standards, legality, asks the United States to determine if striking China first would be in compliance with international law. While one might argue that China's militarization of the South China Sea, documented cyber espionage activities towards US and other international entities, and its currency manipulation are illegal and create a threat to US interests, the threat posed to the United States does not qualify as an imminent and overwhelming threat to the survival of the United States. Therefore, after analyzing Doyle's four standards model in relation to the current situation between the United States and China, a US first strike on China does not appear justified by current standards.

Despite this black and white output, perhaps the United States could effectively use Doyle's argument that the international rules for authorizing preemption are too constraining and unrealistic given the current nature of security threats. The United States could appeal to the international community that activities traditionally believed to be below the threshold of war are currently the way that countries today wage war. In this new case, PRC cyber-attacks could be considered an act of war given that China maliciously violates the US cyber sovereignty of the United States and its citizens. After all, Chinese cyber-attacks penetrate the servers of US companies and result in the theft of US intellectual property and personal information.⁵⁰ These intrusions provide China very inexpensive gains that strengthen China's capability; a capability that China, very likely, will later use against the United States and China's other great power competitors. These intrusions also cost the United States and its citizens a significant amount of lost revenue, to the tune of \$600 billion annually, stemming from intellectual capital since China paid no money to design or purchase these products or rights from US researchers and designers

for the blueprints, hardware, and software had they not been stolen first.⁵¹ In this way, the United States might be justified in taking preemptive action against China in defense of US sovereignty that has been repeatedly attacked already in the cognitive domain that increasingly plays a role in today's competition among states.

Whether the United States achieves international authorization on these grounds or not, it may still be unwise for the United States to delay its response to Chinese aggression. Harkening back to Flynn's example of the Confederate preemption of the Union during the Civil War, perhaps the United States has no reason to delay if conflict is seen as inevitable. While the vast majority of Chinese competition does fall just below the threshold of war by current standards, waiting for the PRC to achieve parity with the United States, or to surpass the United States altogether, only serves to put the United States in a worsening position to effectively address China should China decide to act later.⁵² Why should the United States wait for China to determine when China wishes to reach a point where it might feel capable to escalate the current competition to a state of war? Can actions short of war continue to unfold without drawing a label of war and therefore gain preemptive sanction? Although a rudimentary analogy, China's actions are much like a regional bully on a large playground. Like most bullying situations, the bullying will not stop until someone, or a group of people, have the strength and will to take a stand against the actions of the bully. When allowed to continue unchecked, the bully will naturally continue to increase its malign activities, grow stronger in power and influence, and continue to shape its sphere of influence to serve its own interests more and more. To that end, the United States needs to develop a plan to counter, or stand up to, China's aggression.

A Proposed Concept for US Preemption

Even if the United States chooses to delay a response to China, the United States must develop a concept for preemption in the event China's continued aggressive behavior, military

positioning, and/or threatening rhetoric require the United States to take action to defend itself in the future and perhaps near future. In this vein, the United States should develop a whole of government preemptive approach. The United States must make a formal declaration that any attacks on the sovereignty of the United States or its citizens, to include cyber and information operations, are no longer considered below the threshold of war. After all, if countries like China, Russia, and Iran seek to fight the United States and gain significant advantage in this area, it is already a battleground, and China and the United States are already at war. By setting this expectation and defining a hard line publicly, China and others will be forced to rethink their current activities or accept the risk of a now-justified US response. In this way, the threat of a US preemption of China could serve as a strong deterrent.

Informationally, the United States and partner nations must put greater resources to influencing international actors to see China for the unjustified aggressor that it is. While it claims through its national security strategy not to be expansionist and only wanting fairness and peace in a new world order, the truth is quite the opposite.⁵³ China knows that bad press of its expansionism and aggressive behavior would bring unwanted attention and potentially a stronger balance of power against its actions. By calling China out publicly for its centrist and disruptive actions, the world might wake up and realize the underhanded attack that is underway. The more visibility world actors have of Chinese activities, the less, in theory, that world actors will sit idly by and give China room to gain more ground in an illegitimate fashion. This key sentiment allows justification of preemption should that option prove necessary.

Chinese “One Belt One Road” (OBOR) initiative serves as a perfect starting point. The OBOR, more recently renamed the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), is China’s giant infrastructure project that advertises increased Chinese investment in neighboring countries and increased revenues for all participating countries. If this were done with only honest intentions in mind,

the BRI sounds like a great deal for all involved. However, the truth for China is that the BRI serves to expand the economic, political, and military power of China in all participating countries as well as those states on the Chinese periphery.⁵⁴ Once “built”, the BRI will enable China to control trade in the eastern hemisphere, show favoritism to countries in trade, and, of most concern, the BRI is the perfect excuse for China to drastically project its reformed military power forward to all regions where the BRI exists.⁵⁵ With a regular Chinese military presence, justified by China stating that it must protect its economic interests wherever the BRI exists, China’s ability to coerce more and more of the world to acquiesce to its demands drastically improves.^{56,57} If the United States and allies educate the world through information operations to these truths and potentially a better US offer in the near future, logic may prevail for countries who were strongly considering participating in the BRI under false pretenses.

Economically, the United States and other world powers who do business with China must hold China accountable. China has a massive population that requires significant annual economic growth to support and achieve what President Xi Jinping has promised them: a prosperous future where China is the rich center of all trade roads. Currently, foreign companies wanting to do business in China have to transfer their proprietary technology, intellectual property, and innovative processes to China in order to gain access to Chinese markets.⁵⁸ To make matters worse, the CCP has fused China’s civil and defense technology development sectors into one, an initiative known as Civil-Military Integration, which means that foreign companies doing business with Chinese defense companies are directly and indirectly contributing to the growth, lethality, and expansion of the PLA capability and military advantage.⁵⁹ While profits tend to drive the bottom line for both individual businesses and countries alike, both of these entities need to ask themselves whether short term gains now are better than disadvantageous trade and bargaining positions in the future when China can dictate

the terms of current and future trade deals and then coerce agreements, possibly through the threat of projected military force, when interests do not align.

The United States and allies making smart decisions now is imperative. By enforcing fair and equitable business practices, for which the Chinese are already required to abide by through the World Trade Organization, China will be unable to sustain its current growth rate. A drop in growth rate will create instability within the country of China and put a great deal of pressure on Xi Jinping and the CCP. This instability will also exacerbate the CCP's extreme paranoia towards groups from within its own borders. In total, this tactic, in addition to informational and diplomatic ventures, could make Xi Jinping and the CCP less confident in their desired future state and more malleable regarding the idea of cooperation and fair competition with world powers instead of Chinese bully tactics.

While military power should be the lever of US national power most cautiously pulled, the US military and other clandestine agencies must immediately work together to draw China's focus back inward through destabilization efforts within China and through the Chinese people themselves. In a February 2021 War on the Rocks article entitled "China's Post-Pandemic Future: Wuhan Wobbly?", Dr. Andrew Scobell, a RAND senior political scientist and Marine Corps University Brend Chair of Nonwestern Strategic Thought who specializes in Chinese political and military affairs, stated that "the greatest irony of the People's Republic...is that what the ruling CCP fears most are the people of China. The CCP is fearful that the people power opposition movements which shook countries and toppled regimes around the world will inspire Chinese crowds to take to the streets. The CCP is preoccupied with a plethora of different groups – disgruntled workers, irate farmers, unhappy veterans, disaffected religious groups, and restive ethnic minorities – each of which has registered dissatisfaction through physical demonstrations and online activism in recent years."⁶⁰ Given Scobell's remarks as well

as CCP history, like the fact that the CCP came to power through revolution in a “violent seizure of state power in 1949” and violently retained power through means such as the 1989 Tiananmen massacre, it is clear that the CCP is more afraid of potential threats from within China than from outside Chinese borders.⁶¹ This history makes the CCP very fearful and insecure that it, too, could face the same demise from a strong Chinese opposition group lurking within its population. If the United States could resource and empower opposition groups within China, perhaps aided by the US provision of online access free of Chinese government oversight, to take their fight and grievances to the CCP publicly and on a large-scale, the CCP’s paranoia of overthrow from within could certainly make the CCP feel vulnerable.⁶² This CCP vulnerability would be to the benefit of the United States and its allies in influencing the CCP to believe that it is losing its position of advantage that it gained over the past 30 years. When not in what it believes to be a “superior position,” the CCP often waits to take additional action until it feels that it has regained a superior position over an adversary.⁶³ Scobell reinforces this by stating that, “without enduring political stability at home, China’s continued rise will be far more difficult...China’s prospects for domestic instability and botched defense transformation cannot be dismissed.”⁶⁴ This idea of encouraging domestic instability within China could create an opportunity for the United States and allies to capitalize on CCP vulnerability forestalling the need to for the United States to resort to greater escalation that could lead to war.

As destabilization efforts attack the CCP’s foundation within China, the United States and its allies must be prepared to preemptively attack China if it crosses the previously established threshold. Without following through on this threat, the United States will lose immense international credibility. US military options may seem robust, but the goal should be to further back China down without starting World War III. The United States must be the moral and just party in preemptive action.⁶⁵ Without maintaining the high ground and legitimacy in the

conflict, the United States could very well lose the support of the international community and, much worse, international support could sway towards China as the perceived victim.⁶⁶

In consideration of where to take action without the United States ensnaring itself and others in a much larger war, the United States could create a coalition of Chinese neighbors to further contain China's expansion and aggressiveness in the Indo-Pacific region. Working alongside Australia, Japan, India, and others, the United States could establish a venue, or attempt to use existing partnerships such as the "The Quad," that continuously observes Chinese activities and acts, when necessary, to keep China in line with the internationally recognized rules-based order.⁶⁷ For countries like Australia and Japan, Chinese violations and encroachment could be viewed as "threat[s] to democracies in the Indo-Pacific" and could have significant " geopolitical implications...[that] complicate [their] security situation."⁶⁸ When China oversteps these rules or crosses established red lines set by the coalition, the United States and coalition partners could act in a number of non-kinetic ways such as cyber-attacks that temporarily take Chinese capabilities or resources offline. These sort of coalition, non-kinetic attacks could shut down power to certain areas of Chinese government or do something more positive like bring down Chinese firewalls that currently prevent the Chinese people from accessing information from the outside world on television, from the internet, or through radio. The RAND Corporation *War with China: Thinking Through the Unthinkable* report reinforces the vulnerability to Chinese politics in the event of US cyber warfare when it states that "China could be more vulnerable insofar as the Chinese government relies more on influencing popular sentiment through media, the Internet, and other communications channels than does, or can, the U.S. government. If Beijing's ability to manipulate information, maintain support, and avert disorder is degraded, spontaneous and opposing opinions could roil segments of the population."⁶⁹ These cyber-

attacks could create significant internal problems politically for China without pulling the United States into a long conflict and without ever firing a kinetic shot.

If Chinese behavior heads to war and warrants an act of US kinetic preemption, choosing an isolated target outside of the Chinese mainland appears most effective. For the past decade, China has been illegally building manmade islands off its coast and then has militarized them to push its sphere of control and influence beyond its land borders “in pursuit of its territorial and maritime claims in the South and East China Seas.”⁷⁰ Despite Chinese President Xi Jinping’s 2015 pledge not to pursue militarization of the Spratly Islands, China “continued militarization in the south China Sea by placing anti-ship cruise missiles and long-range surface-to-air missiles on outposts in the Spratly Islands.”⁷¹ Targeting these manmade, military islands addresses a Chinese wrong and sends the message to China that it must halt its malign activity or suffer further escalation of force. Targeting these man-made islands outside of mainland China would be a means for the United States and its allies to demonstrate their sincerity in containing Chinese behavior and make China rethink its actions while also setting conditions to avoid a larger, protracted war.

Potential Consequences of a US-Sino War

As history has unfortunately shown over the last 200 years, preemption rarely remains a limited objective netting a quick conflict. If a US preemption on China follows this same historical pattern, the United States and international community must consider the consequences and risks of a possible large-scale war with China. According to the RAND study, *War with China*, “[w]ar between the United States and China could be so ruinous for both countries, for East Asia, and for the world that it might seem unthinkable.”⁷² The study analyzed the results of a US-Sino war with 2015 capabilities as well as results of a US-Sino conflict utilizing projected 2025 capabilities. In both 2015 and 2025 scenarios, the United States suffered less aggregate

military losses than China, but the disparity in the level of loss between the United States and China closed significantly over time.⁷³ Here is a reason to act preemptively. Yet, to do so, invites the great hazard of starting a war that can rapidly spill out of control.

Still, military parity implies that the longer the United States waits to possibly confront China militarily, the higher the cost and harder the fight will be for the United States against the Chinese military. From an economic perspective, the cost of a larger-scale US-Sino conflict would be substantially bigger for China than the United States in both 2015 and 2025 due to China's significant reliance on bilateral trade with the United States and regional trade in the same area in which the war would most likely take place.⁷⁴ After one year of war, the RAND study projects that the United States would see a 90 percent decline in bilateral trade with China while China would experience a 90 percent decline in bilateral trade with the United States, an 80 percent decline in regional trade, and a 50 percent decline in global trade.⁷⁵ Additionally, the US GDP could decline by 5-10 percent with China experiencing a potential GDP decline of 25-35 percent.⁷⁶ Despite China suffering much larger economic losses, the impact to both countries would be significant. Of note, this RAND study also identified that there exists an "increasing...reward of attacking first and a penalty of not doing so," which places further validity in analyzing a US-Sino conflict through the lens of preemption.⁷⁷ However, this study makes clear that the most important recommendation from its analysis of war between the United States and China is that it is imperative that both "U.S. and Chinese political leaders...have military options other than immediate strikes to destroy opposing forces, having the means to confer and contain a conflict before it gets out of hand."⁷⁸ Neither country will truly benefit from a military conflict; the United States would simply lose less than China overall. This projection represents a best-case scenario that war remains limited and contained in some way and for reasons as yet unidentified. Should a military confrontation spark a wider war, then the

negative impact could be massive. Either way, preemption appears a less sensible option to employ to confront the supposed looming war between these two powers.

Given this probability for significant military and economic loss for both countries if a US-Sino war occurs, the United States and its allies may be best served by using the threat of preemption as a deterrent to help keep conflict with China at a level below the threshold of war. While the very public threat of US preemption could increase the likelihood of war with China, the public nature of the threat brings significant international attention to Chinese actions and possible US reactions. In effect, putting Chinese behavior under a much larger microscope might prove effective in pressuring China to limit controversial activities that it has been able to do in relative privacy while the world focused on conflict in Iraq, Afghanistan, Syria, and Crimea over the past several decades. This additional attention might also make China feel insecure about its now very public behavior and image. With international attention on China and the insecurity this would cause, China could likely decide to retard its aggressive posturing and coercion, and might delay its activities until it believes it has regained its advantage and superior position.⁷⁹ The United States and allies must then ensure that it constantly maintains its superior position and effectively contains China to deny it an opportunity to gain additional ground. Such a move in the direction of diplomacy represents a step away from preemption. The option to strike first to meet the looming threat of war appears unworkable for a number of reasons.

Conclusions

Although an act of preemption does not appear to be in the best interest of the United States currently, Thucydides' Trap, assuming war between the United States and China as inevitable, makes a US-Sino war likely. With tension between the nations in place and liable to escalate at any time, how best to respond to the need to keep things away from war becomes imperative. As previously mentioned in this analysis, a war is not in the interests of either country nor the

international community. Therefore, the need to find a way to get clear of this logic of inevitable war and, thus, get clear of having to consider preemption is of paramount importance.

Having shown the lack of value in acting preemptively, the United States must consider how to defuse the looming clash that Thucydides' Trap predicts. There are some options. The United States must figure out how to compete or cooperate better with China below the threshold of war in the informational, diplomatic, and economic elements of national power to achieve its national objectives. As a RAND Corporation research report entitled *Understanding the Emerging Era of International Competition* states, “[a]n important strain of international relations theory—including classical accounts of alliances and mutual gains, game theoretic examinations of the origins of cooperation, liberal institutionalism, and defensive realism—emphasizes the fact that states usually have cooperative or semicooperative routes to achieving their objectives if they choose them, and that such routes often have a better cost-benefit calculus than competitive ones.”⁸⁰

The United States can pressure China to assume international norms and enforce them. China as a responsible international power supports a balance of power in the Pacific that helps contain the negative aspects of China's rise. Such standing in Asia is more than a justification of US global hegemony. A balance of power would include China, give that state a purpose in preserving world order, and recognize it as a world power, if not a superpower. In short, balance of power could work to make China moderate, which would curb the need for war.

As a partner in the Pacific, China would have to work with the United States to “firm up trust and communication in the allied structures to ensure that no state can benefit from aggression.”⁸¹ Furthermore, “[c]ommunication and trust can be improved by better coordinating allied response during crises and by establishing channels to regularly exchange concerns during peacetime...” like a Pacific Council that creates a multilateral platform for dialogue between

China, the United States, and “U.S. allies in the South and East China Sea[s].”⁸² The focus here is that this binding role curbs China’s current effort to push as far as possible but still act short of war.

Given the preemption-focused scope of this analysis, many other fascinating aspects of US-Sino tensions still remain for future research. Whether China would respect a balance of power in the Indo-Pacific, whether the United States could more effectively deter or coerce China to cease activities counter to US interests and the international rules-based order, and exploring the implications of nuclear weapons on US-Sino tensions, aside from making preemption even less of a viable option, are all research areas that would add significantly to the discussion. Additionally, a detailed case study comparing the US-USSR Cold War in relation to the current US-Sino situation would certainly contribute to the discussion given perceived parallels and learning points. Perhaps these future research topics hold the key to identifying China’s Achilles’ heel, or critical vulnerability, to be targeted should China present an imminent and overwhelming threat to the United States in the future.

Until that time, however, a US preemptive attack on China does not appear to be appropriate. While China clearly desires a multipolar world and to compete with the United States as a great power, its current national actions, up to today, have not directly threatened an imminent and overwhelming attack on the United States. China has not endangered US national integrity nor has it put the United States in a position of fear where it felt like it had no time or other recourse to respond to Chinese actions. This view of the limited utility of preemption also means one should not accept Allison’s fears of the coming war. China’s actions are not as threatening as imagined, nor has the United States not responded. Two great powers are certainly finding their footing in relation to one another, but there is space to defuse tensions and certainly that opening means a very limited need to resort to preemption. This conclusion is

good news given the risks of acting preemptively. Now comes the hard work of keeping things short of the act of war to keep the need for preemption as marginal.

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