Anglo-German rivalry and the 1939 failure of deterrence

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GLOBAL WARS involve situations in which declining system leaders confront ascending challengers. As such, they represent a potentially important and possibly distinctive class of deterrence failure. Under what conditions do system leaders successfully deter challengers? Can declining system leaders rely on behavioral repertoires adopted in times of greater relative capability positions? Does it even matter if declining system leaders attempt deterrence, or has the situation sometimes evolved too far to do anything about a probable challenge? Alternatively, does it matter if the attempted deterrence follows a sequence of interactions with the challenger? The first attempt at deterrence may work better than the second or third if the challenger learns to discount the likelihood of a contingent punishment.

Another reason why these particular confrontations may need separate examination is that the ultimate stakes in contention are so great. These challenges tend not to be about territorial gain or access to raw materials or delineating spheres of influence, even though any or all may be involved. Ultimately, they are about primacy in the world political economy. The stakes may simply be too high for deterrence to work effectively. For that matter, do declining system leaders prefer appeasement over deterrence as befitting their eroding positional edge, and thereby encourage the challenges with which they would prefer not to deal? Global war situations can only represent a potential class of deterrence failure if system leaders have attempted to deter their challengers. We can not assume that this is the

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case. Alternatively, it may be the case that declining system leaders encourage challenges by waffling between appeasement and deterrence.

To explore some of these questions further, it is necessary to reexamine the origins of global warfare in 1939, 1914, 1792, 1688, and 1580, with an eye toward the role of deterrence failure. All of these cases cannot be tackled simultaneously. To initiate the process, this paper will focus on the 1939 case—the one global war case that has probably received the lion’s share of deterrence failure attention. Why are we obsessed with the 1939 Anglo-German failure of deterrence case? It was first of all a dramatic episode in international relations that immediately preceded the outbreak of the Second World War. There is always the possibility that if British decisionmakers somehow had done something different than what they did, the Second World War might have been headed off. That, however, depends in part on how central one sees the Anglo-German rivalry to the onset of the Second World War.

Second, we often argue over whether a case is really a case of deterrence or whether it is something else entirely. If one side claims that it has deterred the other side from attacking, it is often difficult to tell whether the other side ever intended to attack in the first place. In early 1939, the British overtly threatened to punish the Germans if they attacked Poland and the Germans eventually did attack anyway. The appearance of deterrence failure is quite clear. Yet there is reason to doubt that the British threat was sincere, that it was meant to dissuade the Germans from any course of action, or that the Germans intended to attack at the time that the British pronounced their Polish guarantee.

Still, we have no problem in identifying which sides adopted the roles of defender and challenger—another area that is not always easily defined. Third, and finally, what British decisionmakers chose to do seems so patently wrong in terms of deterrence theory that the case serves as an excellent example of what not to do. Do not threaten to punish an attack on a client if you have neither the resolve nor the capability to do so. For some students of the subject, the case is thus not only one involving an obvious attempt at deterrence, it is also one in which the reasons for the failure of deterrence are equally clear. Or, at least, so it seems.

Since we continue to discuss what on the surface seems to be a fairly open and shut case, it is clear that the case must not be quite so transparent.

1. See the debate on what cases should constitute a deterrence data base in Richard N. Lebow and Janice Gross Stein, "Deterrence: The Elusive Dependent Variable," World Politics 42, no. 3 (April 1990): 336–69. Ironically, as it turns out, the 1939 Anglo-German case is one of the few on which Lebow, Stein, Bruce Russett, and Paul Huth agree.
as it seems. One reason for the continued discussion has to do with the question of appeasement policies on the part of the British—why were they pursued and why were they pursued for so long. The morality dimension of the pursuit of appeasement in the face of Hitler also appeals to some. Nevertheless, the real puzzle lies in why the British abandoned appeasement in March 1939 ostensibly to defend Poland—not why they pursued appeasement prior to March 1939. As one historian put it, the reasons for appeasing in the late 1930s were overdetermined, but why then the shift from appeasement to deterrence? What, if anything, does this tell us about the nature of deterrence in world politics?

The late 1930s confrontation between Germany, Britain, and other states has received an enormous amount of attention. Writing some fifty plus years after the conclusion of the devastating war that the confrontation triggered, one is tempted to embrace discretion over valor and acknowledge that everything must have been said that could possibly be said about the attempt of Britain to deter Germany from attacking Poland in 1939. While that may well be the case, we continue to argue about the failure of deterrence in general and particularly in that year. One prime reason for the continuing debate may be that we still have not come to terms with what the “deterrence” episode was about. We know a fair amount about what transpired but these events cannot speak for themselves; they require interpretation—and until we get the interpretation “right,” we are doomed to further disagreement and multiple understandings of what was at stake. The argument advanced in this paper will definitely hinge on a very specific understanding of what the 1939 case was about. It will be argued at the very least that the 1939 case did not involve a straightforward deterrence episode. While we may wish to view it as a case of attempted deterrence, it is not clear that that was the main reason why a British guarantee of Poland emerged in 1939. In the context in which it emerged, any perceived attempt at deterrence was very much a secondary byproduct of other motivations and activities. Thus, it is suggested that the 1939 case is restricted in its ability to shed light on the onsets of global war, the role of deterrence in system leader-challenger or other types of confrontations, the switch from appeasement to deterrence, or even the nature of serial interactions between defenders and challengers. None the less, the analysis of the 1939 case is worthwhile if only to better appreciate why and how such conclusions have been reached.

Before plunging into the case materials, it should be useful to first lay out one's analytical assumptions and theoretical expectations. Some of the disagreement about the 1939 case pivots around analytical preferences and interpretations. Although we may be unlikely to resolve many of these controversies, one's conclusions are likely to be influenced by the various sorts of filters imposed on the case by the analyst. Therefore, the filters should be as visible as possible. Moreover, three of the reasons why the 1939 case is so prominent include its association with the most devastating war experienced to date, the curious switch in policy from appeasement to attempted deterrence in 1939, and the apparent role of domestic political considerations. For all three reasons, it remains an important case, albeit a contestable one and provides as well an interesting opportunity to test hypotheses that link internal and external factors within the context of challenges for world leadership.

ASSUMPTIONS

The interpretation of the 1939 deterrence failure to be advanced here will emphasize an historical-structural perspective, an attempt to construct explicit theory about a certain class of challenger-defender confrontation, and an additional interest in delineating adequately the role of rivalries in the outcome of the 1939 confrontation. Since these emphases are not modest in their scope, a single essay (and a single case) can only go so far in delivering on what is promised. Analytical corners will need to be cut, historical description must be minimized, and some level of tolerance for a number of assumptions will need to be taken for granted.

Any interpretation of the 1939 case will be variably dependent on the assumptions brought to bear on the assessment. Therefore, we must first clarify the assumptions that are being utilized.

Assumption 1

Two distinct types of arenas in world politics need to be distinguished from one another. A large proportion of international political activity takes place at the regional level in which the focus is on issues that arise among proximate actors. Territorial boundaries and their implications as well as the regional pecking order of who is subordinate to whom loom large in regional conflicts. The number and the significance of different regions in the world vary over time as do the number of actors and their capabilities that are
found within regions. It is useful to contrast these regional political systems with the global political system which is not envisioned here as simply the sum of the regional parts. Rather, global politics is concerned with the management of problems that arise from inter-regional transactions, and especially long-distance commerce.

It follows from this initial assumption that some states are likely to specialize in either regional or global activities but that only a few have the capability to do both. Participating in regional and global activities also places a premium on different types of capabilities. Global politics requires capabilities that make global reach feasible and, historically, that has meant naval and air power financed by vibrant and innovative economies with strong interests in inter-regional trade. Regional politics has tended to place a premium on bulk or quantity. Historically, regional leadership has been won with large populations, large economies, and large armies.\(^3\)

Despite the analytical distinctions between regional and global activities, it is not always possible to disentangle them. In particular, they tend to fuse intermittently and especially when regional conflicts threaten the security of the global political economy. Not all regions have sufficient capability to pose such threats. Those regions that are most peripheral to the dynamics of economic innovation, growth and commerce are least likely to pose significant threats. The regions with the most significance and threat potential are the ones that are least peripheral to these dynamics.

In world history, the identity of the regions that have been most central and salient has shifted throughout Eurasia and North America. Between roughly 1500 and 1945, however, western Europe became the most central and salient region in the world. The reasons for this change are complex and continue to be argued. For immediate purposes, it suffices to note that after 1500 and until the early twentieth century, most of the global powers were located in and around western Europe. Their geographical location made it difficult to fully insulate themselves from more local concerns. The most dangerous regional question has been dubbed recently and most aptly as the Western question.\(^4\) Would one state rise to dominance in western Europe or would the region retain its multipolar structure? The periodic conflicts over the Western question posed repeated threats to the global powers. Responding to these threats contributed greatly to the temporary

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fusion of global and Western European politics in periods of intense conflict and crisis for both the central regional and global systems. For better or worse, these periodic conflicts have also served as the primary object of theorizing about international relations.\(^5\)

The primary axis of these periodic fusions evolved into a confrontation between the state threatening to dominate the region coercively and the leader of the global powers. Regional bids for hegemony were more likely in periods of relative decline for the global system leader. The declining leader, usually in coalition with other threatened states and including sometimes its own successor as global system leader as well as at least one major land-power ally, would engage the regional challenger in global war. While the regional challenger has lost in every round fought so far, the declining global leader does not always survive the exhausting experience of global war. It may be replaced by a more innovative economy and one more capable of producing and mobilizing capabilities of global reach.

**ASSUMPTION 2**

It is possible and perhaps even probable that the pattern of confrontations between global system leaders and European regional hegemonic aspirants ended in 1945. Although, at times, the containment efforts aimed at the Soviet Union may have resembled earlier attempts to prevent regional hegemony, something much broader than the fate of the west European region was at stake. Indeed, the U.S.-USSR rivalry more closely resembled the older Anglo-Russian rivalry than it did the Anglo-French or Anglo-German rivalries. These broader rivalries (the ones between the U.S. and the USSR and Britain versus Russia) were primarily about control of Eurasia and pitted two very different types of global power (a land versus sea-power match) against one another. Thus, it is conceivable that the global-regional type of conflict on which the current focus is oriented has been rendered obsolete by evolutionary changes in world politics. Rather than assume obsolescence, however, it seems safer to assume that the regional emphasis is more likely to shift, along with the focus of most rapid economic growth, to a different part of the Eurasian land mass. East Asia, the leadership of which has long been disputed among China, Japan, and Russia, seems rather well suited to become the new focus of the old Western question pattern—something that we might call the Far Eastern question. Given the actors

involved in this contest, nuclear weapons may well play some role (escalatory or deescalatory in effect) at some point, but there is no reason to assume that a) the Far Eastern question cannot become fused with the global question of leadership and b) that the manner in which it might become fused militarily could not assume a conventional weaponry character at least in its initial stages.

ASSUMPTION 3

The greatest simplification that can be made about the outbreak of the Second World War, one of the rounds of global war noted in assumption one, is that the primary responsibility for the war rests with the German leader, Adolf Hitler. No Hitler, no Second World War. If one adopts assumption one, this simplification holds little attraction. The outbreak of global war is always more complex than the presence or absence of a single individual. Nevertheless, it is difficult to discuss the phenomena of 1939 without declaring an initial stand on Hitler. The question is not whether the Second World War might have occurred in his absence. An adherent to assumption one would have at least to entertain that possibility as conceivable (but certainly not inevitable). Rather, the question is whether Hitler and German expansion in the 1930s operated according to a plan, or responded opportunistically to opportunities as they presented themselves.

The available evidence seems to support a compromise position.6 There were certainly preferences, priorities, and ambitions on the German side, just as there were on the opposing side(s). The British, for example, were concerned first with defending their home base, second with maintaining their empire and, third, with stability in Europe—with western Europe being far more important than eastern Europe. German strategic preferences were focused on acquiring lebensraum in southeastern Europe and Russia. To achieve this goal, first priority was given to removing immediate threats in central Europe (for example, Austria, Czechoslovakia, and Poland), second priority to defeating France in the West (and probably its ally, Britain), and third priority to defeating Russia in the east. The United States would probably have to be dealt with at a later point.

Yet an outline of German preferences, admittedly constructed after the fact, does not mean that German decisionmakers were following a script

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carefully delineated in 1923. While there are hints about priorities in Hitler's earlier writings, he changed his mind about some things (including the necessity of defeating Britain and the potential significance of the United States) and he also reacted to opportunities and his opponents' behavior, as illustrated by his irritation over the Munich outcome. Different responses at various points in the sequence of events leading up to the outbreak of war in 1939 (for example, an Italian military response to the Anschluss, a French attack on the Siegfried Line or greater Czech resistance in 1938–39, a German military revolt in 1938 or the failure to achieve a Russo-German pact) would probably have led to different German behavior. In other words, the sequence of events was iterative; in each iteration things could have worked out differently on all sides concerned. What the Germans chose to do next in the sequence seems to have depended on what happened in the previous iterations.

That is not to say there were no German goals or ambitions. There definitely were, but there was also variable flexibility about how and when those goals were to be achieved. To acquire the territory Germany was thought to need to survive as a major power, it would be necessary to first eliminate immediately adjacent threats, defeat France and, no doubt, Britain, and then take on Russia. In the process, western and eastern Europe would be subordinated to Germany.

ASSUMPTION 4

The 1939–1945 fighting that we refer to as the Second World War can be interpreted in a variety of ways. Some see the 1914–45 period as one extended global war with some fluctuations in the combat between the peak years in 1914–18 and 1939–45. Alternatively, one can argue that 1939–45 picked up where 1914–18 left off. While some analysts see all the conflicts of the late 1930s and the first half of the 1940s amalgamated into one wide spread and interrelated bout of intense warfare, others prefer to maintain some independence for specific theaters (for instance, the Russo-Finnish war or differentiating the Atlantic from the Pacific fighting). Still others view the Second World War as primarily a three-way conflict among the United States, Germany, and the Soviet Union, with all other actors largely subordinated to the goals and actions of the most central players.

A deterrence focus on Britain and Germany does not seem to be affected all that much by disputes about the dating of the twentieth century's world war(s), or whether all conflicts fused into one, or whether some remained separate. The tripolar interpretation is more critical for one of its
implications is that the British-German rivalry was a mere sideshow to the main action between Germany and the Soviet Union (and, somewhat later, the United States).\(^7\) In some respects that may well be true. The problem, though, is that it is very difficult to reduce the Second World War to any single dyad or even the three dyads implicit to the tripolar conceptualization (Germany-USSR, Germany-U.S.A., and U.S.A.-USSR). For one thing, the actors themselves held a variety of views at different times on the relative salience of the eventual war participants. The Soviets feared that a war might be reduced to a German-Soviet dyad. The British and French decisionmakers thought Polish military capabilities were more useful than those of the Soviets, especially after the purges of the Soviet officer corps. The Germans, or at least Adolf Hitler, tended to dismiss the United States as an insignificant player, and at various times in the interwar period, German decisionmakers emphasized the leading enemy status of Poland, France, and the Soviet Union. Thus, if the Second World War was or became a tripolar contest, the actors themselves often behaved as if the world was more complex than the tripolar imagery allows.

Yet it does not necessarily matter all that much for immediate purposes how many poles predominated in what all would agree was a multipolar world. The problem still remains that the British are thought to have attempted deterrence against the Germans in 1939. If that is in fact what they did, the questions remain of why they did it and why it proved unsuccessful. If the answer turns out to be a combination of German preoccupation with the Soviets or the Americans leading to a dismissal or an underappreciation of the British contingent threat and the British, themselves, not realizing that they were no longer central players, then the tripolar thesis could provide an explanation. The 1939 attempt at deterrence was simply irrelevant to the game in motion. While one can find both German and British misperceptions present in varying degrees, the presence of misperceptions alone, it is assumed, is insufficient to account for what happened in 1939.

Assumptions one through four are neither short, trivial, or uncontroversial. There is no question that alternative assumptions might be constructed and that one’s consequent interpretations are likely to differ according to the assumptions introduced at the outset. Nevertheless, there seems to be no way of evading strong assumptions about the meaning of 1939. Even the complete absence of any assumptions would only really amount to another set of strong assumptions. A fifth assumption is that it is better to be

explicit and "wrong" about one's assumptions than it is to be comfortable with implicit and hidden assumptions that have just as much influence on analytical outcomes as the other kind. With assumptions one through four (and five) in full display, we are ready to return to the question of deterrence failure in 1939.

THE CONVENTIONAL INTERPRETATION OF 1939

The conventional interpretation of the 1939 Anglo-German confrontation resembles the following version. From 1933 to 1939 Nazi Germany, stimulated by a widespread desire to reverse its defeat in the First World War and the consequent restrictions imposed by the Versailles postwar settlement, gradually rearmed more quickly than its major power opponents. In a series of crises beginning with the reoccupation of the Rhineland and proceeding through the Austrian coup, Munich, and the occupation of Czechoslovakia, German expansion succeeded and met with little British, French, or Soviet opposition. British decisionmakers, in particular, were characterized by an eagerness to appease Germany, due either to a belief that German expansionist goals were both modest and not entirely unwarranted or undesirable, a lack of interest in eastern Europe, or because conciliation was essential to buy time for British rearmament. Moreover, British decisionmakers were reluctant to align themselves completely with either the Soviets or the French. Little significant help could be expected from the Americans.

After Czechoslovakia was occupied, however, and the extent of German goals revealed, a stand had to be taken. Germany was warned that an attack on Poland or certain other states in eastern Europe would be met by British and French retaliation. Despite the Western threat, the Germans called the British bluff and attacked Poland. A period of "phony war" ensued while Britain and France waited for Germany to make its next move.

The attempt at deterrence was too little, too late. The British and French had little capability to do much about a German attack on Poland. The extent of their commitment was dubious. Their credibility was limited by the marked disinclination to take action in the string of earlier crises. Problems with capability, commitment, and credibility thus led to a failure of deterrence but not to a failure of deterrence theory. To avoid such failures in the future, decisionmakers must be sure to communicate their commitments clearly and to maintain their credibility by avoiding Munich-like appeasements as well as maintaining their capability to act.
One variant or sidebar on the conventional story is that one side (Germany) was led by a monomaniac who was unlikely to be deterred from pursuing the conquest of Europe. Unless the leader had been removed by a domestic coup, war was nearly inevitable because the German leader eagerly embraced war as the necessary instrument to realize his goals. In this variant, appeasement was still a bad idea but it did not really matter with what or how the status quo side threatened the revisionist side led by an irrational leader. War was inevitable thanks to Adolf Hitler.

So what is wrong with the conventional story? It is not entirely off the mark. Still, it does gloss over some interesting facets of what took place. The most serious problem is its lack of historical and structural context. Two major powers are featured—Britain and Germany—and they are portrayed as generally similar actors with two caveats. First, Britain was defending the status quo and Germany sought to revise it. Second, Germany had more military capability on land in Europe than did Britain. As a consequence, the revisionist power was in a strong position to upset the regional status quo. The unprepared defenders had not paid sufficient attention to maintaining their defenses.

Yet Britain and Germany were not generic major powers. Britain had been the leading industrial-commercial power of the nineteenth century. Around the turn of the twentieth century, Germany had become the most serious European challenger to supplant British predominance. The First World War was one outcome of this confrontation, but Germany had not been partitioned and dismembered as much as it might have been in 1919–20. Britain’s relative positional decline, which had long preceded 1914–1918, was only accelerated by participation in global war. In the 1930s, Germany’s ascent was on the rise once again as the most powerful actor in Europe while Britain’s position continued to decay as the former but still unreplaced leader of the global system. Thus, the nature of the Anglo-German confrontation in 1939 places it in a relatively rare category—confrontations between declining global system leaders and rising regional challengers that seek first to conquer their region’s resource base and then use that foundation for even more ambitious assaults on the world’s order.

Another way of expressing the difference between the conventional story and the present interpretation is that 1939 did not represent a situation in which major power A coveted the resources of minor power C and in which major power B was attempting to persuade A that the costs of attacking C exceeded the possible benefits of controlling C’s population and territory. Instead, major power A was removing close-at-hand threats that were proximate to its borders before it went after bigger fish to the west, proba-
bly including major power B, or to the east. Presumably, the calculations for the revisionist major power (A) differ from one version to the other. In the conventional version, A weighs the threat of B versus the gains associated with acquiring C. In the present interpretation, the minor power is less important to both major powers; what is important is when and where A and B choose to clash.

In the conventional version, the British attempt to dissuade Germany from attacking Poland is a straightforward attempt at deterrence. In the current interpretation, 1939 becomes something less straightforward. Some might describe it as more an act of defiance in which the declining status quo side throws down its gauntlet and says it is finally ready to fight if the revisionist side’s expansion persists. The question is whether anyone should really have expected the revisionist side to be deterred by a threat of something the revisionist side expected at some point to occur anyway.

A closely related aspect of these distinctions is that Britain was a sea power and Germany was a land power. This mismatch of capabilities was neither coincidental or random. It stems from the structured roles Britain and Germany had assumed. The global system leader has traditionally been a naval power because seapower is crucial to policing and defending the status quo of the world economy, just as it has been crucial to achieving global predominance in the first place. For nearly the last five hundred years, on the other hand, the principal challenger has emerged from the ranks of the leading European land powers: in succession, the Habsburgs, the French, and the Germans.

The mismatch in capabilities influenced the deterrent situation. The British could at best threaten the prospect of a long war, accompanied by a maritime blockade of western Europe. The Germans were encouraged, in contrast, to cultivate blitzkrieg tactics which enabled them to strike quickly and decisively on land. Reliance on different types of military strategies contributed to the deterrence failure. What the British could threaten for the long term was not seen as much of a threat in the short term.

Still another element of the conventional story that seems odd is the matching of Britain and Germany as the primary contenders in 1939. Neither side could really afford to go to war against the other in 1939. Germany could not withstand a long war; Britain could do little in a short war. Neither side was really prepared to engage in war vis-à-vis finances, popular mobilization, and weapons’ stockpiles. If pressed, the conventional storyteller might fall back on the balance of power and Britain’s role as balancer. As long as one does not push the balance of power as either automatic or especially stabilizing, this partial explanation does not conflict with the
present interpretation. The global system leader has preferred a balance of forces in important regions, and, therefore, especially western Europe. As long as the balance was not upset and no single state emerged as the clear regional hegemon, the likelihood of an even more serious threat to the global political economy was less likely. Regional contenders could jostle one another and seek to improve their position marginally without exciting the fears of the global system leader's decisionmakers. When the goals were perceived as expanding beyond the marginal threshold, the stakes suddenly became more intense.

The flip side of this structural logic is that a state that threatened to dominate western Europe became an immediate threat to the global system leader even if the challenger had no immediate intentions of assaulting the system leader. A confrontation therefore was not inevitable. The system leader must first identify its principal challenger, often from a lineup encompassing several potential candidates, but once it does, a confrontation of some sort becomes much more probable. How it is played out depends on the circumstances of the confrontation.

THE CIRCUMSTANCES OF CONFRONTATION

To theorize about the circumstances of confrontation I borrow from recent theoretical work on grand strategy by Rosecrance and Stein. They are interested in how domestic constraints and international pressures combine to influence strategic behavior. In their discussion of this problem, they generate several contingency tables matching such factors as economic decline and external threat to produce predictions about probable behavior. Table 1 represents an adaptation of some of their arguments, except that, unlike them, I seek to generalize as broadly as possible about the interplay of internal and external factors. I also do not privilege domestic constraints to the same extent as they do when they suggest that international stimuli generate a response when the domestic political and economic factors are conducive to it. Conversely, domestic imperatives can sometimes generate aggressive policies that should be precluded by the restraints of the external environment.

9. Ibid., 17.
Table 1

CHALLENGE AND RESPONSE TO CHALLENGE STRATEGIES

**Challenger’s perspective**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>External environment</th>
<th>More facilitative</th>
<th>Less facilitative</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>More facilitative</td>
<td>Most probable</td>
<td>Possible</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>(A)</td>
<td>(B)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Less facilitative</td>
<td>Unlikely</td>
<td>Most unlikely</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>(C)</td>
<td>(D)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Defending system leader’s perspective**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Internal environment</th>
<th>More facilitative</th>
<th>Less facilitative</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>More facilitative</td>
<td>Vigorous containment</td>
<td>Resist with or without allies</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>(A)</td>
<td>(B)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Less facilitative</td>
<td>Inactive foreign policy/isolation</td>
<td>Appeasement/conciliation</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>(C)</td>
<td>(D)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Their argument that more attention should be given to domestic factors in explaining grand strategies is well taken. They may also be right about the necessary and sometimes sufficient role of domestic factors. Whether internal or external factors are more influential in shaping behavior remains, however, an open theoretical and empirical question. I assume, more neutrally, that either internal or external factors can constrain or facilitate strategic behavior. I am also restricting the behavior in question to challenges of global system leaders although, with a little tinkering, it seems likely that the probable behaviors could be generalized to the more generic defender-challenger format. Finally, I am also assuming that the calculi vary depending on whether one is the challenger or the state being challenged. Deter-
Table 2
SELECTED FACTORS THAT ARE MORE OR LESS FACILITATIVE FOR MOUNTING AND OPPOSING CHALLENGES

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Internal environment</th>
<th>More facilitative</th>
<th>Less facilitative</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Autocratic centralization of power</td>
<td>Democratic decentralization of power</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Prosperity and economic growth</td>
<td>Depression</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Public support for foreign policy</td>
<td>Public opposition to foreign policy</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Domestic stability</td>
<td>Domestic instability</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Expansionist ambitions (for challenger)</td>
<td>Limited foreign policy goals</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Ample access to sinews of war</td>
<td>Limited access to sinews of war</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>External environment</th>
<th>Unambiguous threat (for system leader)</th>
<th>Ambiguous threat (for system leader)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Small number of rivals</td>
<td>Large number of rivals</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Relatively weak opponents</td>
<td>Relatively strong opponents</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Strong support from strong allies</td>
<td>Weak support from weak allies</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Appropriate capability base for necessary military operations</td>
<td>Inappropriate capability base for necessary military operations</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Well-defended home base (insularity)</td>
<td>Poorly defended home base (lack of insularity)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Ascending relative capability</td>
<td>Declining relative capability</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Of course, the greatest problem in applying the simple theory involved in Table 1's two separate sets of calculations is knowing in which cell actors find themselves at a particular point of time. The assessment on the part of the actors is subjective. Whether factors are more or less facilitative depends on perception. It also makes some difference as to which factors are considered important and what their relative weights might be vis-à-vis other important factors. Table 2 suggests some of the factors in both the domestic and external environments that are likely to be viewed as critical. Yet it would be foolish to assume that all of the identified factors are always
equally critical. It seems more likely that they will come together in different ways at different times.

Table 3

SELECTED PREDICTIONS ABOUT THE LIKELIHOOD OF DETERRENCE

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Challenger position</th>
<th>System leader position</th>
<th>Likelihood of successful deterrence</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>A</td>
<td>A</td>
<td>Improbable situation</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>A</td>
<td>B</td>
<td>Poor—dependent on balancing coalition</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>A</td>
<td>C</td>
<td>Deterrence unlikely to be attempted</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>A</td>
<td>D</td>
<td>Most unlikely</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>B</td>
<td>A</td>
<td>Good</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>B</td>
<td>B</td>
<td>Slightly favoring the status quo?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>B</td>
<td>C</td>
<td>Moderate</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>B</td>
<td>D</td>
<td>Ultimately poor because there is considerable potential for a shift to an A-D situation</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Notes: The letters signifying the respective positions refer to the four cells delineated in any two-by-two contingency table and in Table 1. Beginning in the upper left-hand cell with A, the upper right-hand cell is B, the lower left-hand cell is C, and the lower right-hand cell is D. Combinations involving categories C and D from the challenger’s perspective are ignored because deterrence by the system leader is apt to be either successful or unnecessary.

The factors, however, are intermixed in practice, the general point is that the external and domestic environments are either more or less facilitative in the aggregate. If so, we should be able to use that information to predict how each actor is most likely to behave. If we can do that with any accuracy, it should also be possible to combine the predictions about the two types of actors to predict additionally whether the global system leader is likely to deter the challenger. Table 3 lists some of the most interesting combinations of the strategic situations sketched in Figure 1. Missing are combinations involving unlikely challenge situations, perhaps, ironically, the most fertile circumstances for system leaders to deter challenges.
Returning to the 1939 case, the question is how should we categorize the Britain and German situations in terms of their perceptions of their respective domestic and external environments? Table 4 supplies one answer employing the factors delineated in Table 1. On the domestic front, Germany clearly had the edge in terms of political centralization. German decisionmakers, equally clearly, entertained expansionist ambitions. A revisionist foreign policy was popular in Germany although important military elites were skeptical of the wisdom of moving too quickly with only limited military capability.\textsuperscript{10} These reservations might have become more significant if Britain, France, or the Soviet Union had been able to intervene militarily in the 1938 Czech crisis. The absence of great power military resistance in 1938 or 1939 had the effect of reducing the political significance of German military reservations.

Otherwise, Germany probably enjoyed a slight edge in economic performance, at least relative to Britain. Neither side could be said to be prosperous. Both were still coping with the after effects of the Depression. Neither side could boast substantial access to the financial sinews of war even though, in the long run, Britain fared better thanks to American assistance. At the same time, it is doubtful that anyone could have foreseen what level of financial assistance and credit would be made available. Finally, both Britain and Germany enjoyed a level of political stability.

Externally, as in the case of the domestic factors, the environment seemed to favor the German side. The rise to power of the Nazis in 1932 boosted Germany rather quickly into British military intelligence's pick as the principal external threat to Britain.\textsuperscript{11} Only the British naval service preferred other candidates such as Japan and Italy. Nevertheless, a number of British civilian decisionmakers harbored several illusions about the potential implications of a resurgent Germany. Some felt that a bounded greater Germany that reunited former German nationals separated by Versailles merited support and could lead to greater European stability. Another position was that a strong Germany could prove useful in stemming Soviet advances. There was also the widespread conviction that Britain simply could not afford another European war. The previous one had been too devastating. Britain was only slowly recovering from the depression of the early 1930s and could not afford rearmament. Without substantial rearmament, British military force, oriented toward seapower and imperial policing

\textsuperscript{10} See the discussion in Gerhard L. Weinberg, \textit{Germany, Hitler, and World War II: Essays in Modern German and World History} (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995), 129-45.

\textsuperscript{11} See Wesley K. Wark, \textit{The Ultimate Enemy: British Intelligence and Nazi Germany, 1933-1939} (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1985).
objectives, could not be expected to play much of a role on the European continent until much later in a long war.\textsuperscript{12}

As a consequence, a number of British decisionmakers were prepared to hope that the extent of the German threat was less than others feared. Even if it was maximal in its ultimate extent, the more time that could be bought so much the better for British rearmament—even though this rearmament seemed rather slow in developing. Attitudes such as these were encouraged by mixed signals from Germany. Thus, while some observers could quite correctly argue that there should have been no ambiguity in the nature of the German threat, this position remained a minority position until the Germans occupied Czechoslovakia in early 1939.

Both Britain and Germany possessed a fairly large number of rivals. The British position was that most of the major powers, if not all, were rivals of various kinds. In addition to the overt military threats by Germany, Italy, and Japan, British decisionmakers were concerned by the likelihood of Soviet and American positional gains should Britain be forced to go to war.\textsuperscript{13} In this respect, British perceptions were that its field of rivals was expanding as tensions increased. Germany, in contrast, had the advantage of perceiving some of its rivalries being placed on hold, at least temporarily. The 1939 pact with the Soviet Union allowed Germany to concentrate on its western rivals—neither of which were considered particularly formidable. There was no reason to be concerned about American involvement so this potential threat could also be shelved for the moment. The number of rivals that Germany had to contend with were being reduced just as Britain’s rivalry field was expanding.

British military intelligence tended to exaggerate German capabilities.\textsuperscript{14} German perceptions, at least on the part of Hitler, that France and Britain


\textsuperscript{14}Actually, British military intelligence underrated and overrated German capabilities at various times. See Wark \textit{The Ultimate Enemy}, Correlli Barnett, \textit{The Collapse of British Power}.
would not assume the offensive proved accurate. With British military resources keyed to naval power, Britain required an ally or allies with an impressive continental military presence. The French, characterized in the interwar years by considerable political instability at the governmental level, seemed content to depend on the defensive strength of their Maginot Line. The Soviets had recently emerged from a period of purges that had decimated the officer ranks and rendered any offensive capability questionable. Moreover, Britain's allies in eastern Europe feared the presence of Soviet troops as much if not more than they did the possibility of a German invasion. If their permission was necessary for the transit of Soviet troops to a possible engagement with German forces, it would not be forthcoming. In any event, the prospect of a close alliance with the Soviets remained politically distasteful in both Britain and France. While British decisionmakers recognized the capability potential of the United States, they also discounted heavily the likelihood that any meaningful support would be forthcoming from that quarter in the immediate future. Thus, while the Germans had their own problems with securing commitments from allies, the lack of allied support was far more crippling for Britain's deterrence problem than it was for German offensive calculations. Without sufficient ground-force capability, the British threat to intervene over Czechoslovakia or Poland was not credible in the short run.

Whereas the British had the wrong sort of capability to fight a short European ground war, the Germans possessed less military capability than most external observers thought. As long as serious military resistance was not encountered, these shortcomings would not be exposed. German defenses were also less ready than thought but, as long as the Siegfried Line was perceived to be difficult to penetrate, it more than served its purpose.

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15. The strategic advantages and limitations of the leading seapower are discussed in George Modelski and William R. Thompson, *Seapower in Global Politics, 1494–1993* (London: Macmillan, 1988), 3-26; and Colin S. Gray, *The Leverage of Sea Power: The Strategic Advantage of Navies in War* (New York: Free Press, 1992), 278-90. Alliance with a strong land power has been highly probable if the main opponent was also a strong land power.


Table 4

BRITAIN AND GERMANY IN TERMS OF THE FACILITATIVE FACTORS, 1939

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Factors</th>
<th>More facilitative</th>
<th>Less facilitative</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Domestic</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Centralization</td>
<td>Germany</td>
<td>Britain</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Economic growth</td>
<td></td>
<td>Germany</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Public support</td>
<td>Germany</td>
<td>Britain</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Stability</td>
<td>Germany/Britain</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Expansionist goals</td>
<td>Germany</td>
<td>Britain</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>War sinews</td>
<td></td>
<td>Germany/Britain</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>In aggregate</td>
<td>Germany</td>
<td>Britain</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>External</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Threat ambiguity</td>
<td></td>
<td>Britain</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Rivals number</td>
<td>Germany</td>
<td>Britain</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Opponent strength</td>
<td>Germany</td>
<td>Britain</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Allied support</td>
<td></td>
<td>Germany/Britain</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Capability base</td>
<td>Germany</td>
<td>Britain</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Insularity</td>
<td>Britain</td>
<td>Germany</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Capability trajectory</td>
<td>Germany</td>
<td>Britain</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>In aggregate</td>
<td>Germany</td>
<td>Britain</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Capability trajectories raise more long-term concerns. The British relative capability position had been in decline for some time. Precisely how long decline had been in progress is a subject of some debate. Economic innovation had begun to lag as early as the mid-nineteenth century. After the First World War, Britain was no longer the unchallenged leading seapower it had once been. Its financial and commercial leadership was also on the
wane. Both sides were fully cognizant of British weaknesses; in retrospect, both sides may have exaggerated British weaknesses. The Germans certainly underestimated the traditional British ability to defend its home islands from attack. Nevertheless, Britain had long since ceased to be the world’s leading maritime-commercial power that it had been in the nineteenth century.

The German capability trajectory has to be regarded as ascending in light of the very poor position Germany enjoyed after the First World War. In fact, that war had served only as a temporary check on German ascent while, at the same time, further accelerating British decline. While Hitler and others may have worried that time was running out for Germany to further improve its relative position before they were forced out of an exclusive American-Soviet playing field, German economic and military capabilities, from both absolute and relative perspectives, were ascending in the late 1930s.

In general, domestic and external environments were or were perceived as facilitative for a German challenge. In some instances, circumstances were not as facilitative as some decisionmakers thought, but then misperceptions are legion in international relations. These misconstrued elements (such as subsequent American and Soviet participation), moreover, took some time to impact on the military conflict. Also in the aggregate, domestic and external environments were or were perceived as more constrained for a British defense of the status quo. If this assessment is reasonably accurate, we would classify the German-British confrontation as an A-D situation. As noted in Figure 1, the Germans should be expected to mount a challenge; the declining global system leader, all other things being equal and putting aside normative considerations, should be expected to be conciliatory or to withdraw into isolation.

The first half of the prediction is accurate. The second half, focusing on the probability of British appeasement, only holds until early 1939. The German occupation of Czechoslovakia clarified the nature of the German threat and stimulated a public demand for an appropriate response. We may be glad that it did but it still demands explanation.

Several possible explanations come to mind. One is that the simple two by two contingency table approach to theory construction helps produce an overly simplified outcome that cannot capture the complications associated with some cases. That may prove to be the case, but it begs the question as to what the special complications of the 1939 case are. There is also no reason to jettison the framework constructed above hastily and on the basis of a single case. At least, the case in question deserves closer scrutiny.
Another possibility is that there is something distinctive about British foreign policy that we are overlooking. For instance, Kennedy has argued that appeasement was the "traditional" British approach to dealing with threats to the European status quo.\(^{18}\) By "traditional" he means dating back to the 1860s and the development of a strategic preference for distancing Britain as much as feasible from entanglement in continental quarrels due to an eroding capability to intervene effectively. This preference was also embedded within a prevailing Gladstonian interpretation about the rationality of the other side and the probability of reaching a diplomatic solution if the appropriate negotiations were allowed to function. An appeasement "culture" might then explain British behavior prior to March 1939, but it does not help us explain how British decisionmakers broke free of this strategic constraint.

A somewhat parallel explanation argues that to understand what happened in 1939 (in March and in September), it is necessary to appreciate that the British and German sides were operating on different time horizons. The British guarantee to Poland was predicated on an assumption that if the deterrent failed, the strategy of waiting for an attack in the west would not really be affected because the British were in no position to back up their guarantee. A German insistence on continued European expansion would only be defeated by a long-term war of attrition combining British seapower and French manpower. By taking this long-term view, however, they undermined the possible effectiveness of their deterrent in the short term because the British and French chose not to enlist the Soviet Union as part of a more comprehensive allied deterrent in the east and west. In the short-term view from which German decisionmakers were operating, there was nothing to stop them from attacking Poland.\(^{19}\)

The simplicity of this interpretation is seductive. The explanation also is quite compatible with an historical-structural perspective in as much as it draws attention to the propensities for different types of strategies and strategic outlooks depending on different types of resource base. Nevertheless, there is a problem. Alexandroff and Rosecrance see three options for the British in March 1939: do nothing/continued appeasement; guarantee Poland and Rumania against German attack; or cultivate a Russian alliance which might give some substance to eastern European guarantees. They suggest that the best move would have been to do nothing because the Germans did not intend to attack Poland in March. A later attack might


have brought the Soviets in earlier on the western side. Yet the British did not know for sure whether the Germans were planning to attack and at one point in the deliberations leading up to the Polish guarantee, an imminent attack was thought likely.

Given what decisionmakers knew in early 1939, the third option of creating a Soviet alliance was actually the best strategy from a long-term view. Doing nothing or guaranteeing Poland meant that the Germans could attack Poland and then move east or west without fearing the combined resistance of the three powers. Although the British may thus have entertained wishful thinking about the probable success of a long-term defensive strategy, their decision in March 1939 did not in fact reflect long-term decision making. In fact, Alexandroff and Rosecrance acknowledge this by observing that the do nothing option was not conceivable in terms of domestic political pressures to respond vigorously and that the Soviet option was not pursued because Chamberlain mistrusted the Soviets and the appropriate negotiations would take too long. If, however, the second option of a Polish guarantee offered a quick-fix solution, it hardly reflected a long-term perspective. In March 1939, on the contrary, it is possible to argue that the time horizon problem was reversed: the guarantee to Poland came about because the British were operating on a shorter-term perspective than their German opponents.

In a later analysis, Rosecrance and Steiner take this argument one step further by contending that what March 1939 reveals is the power of domestic factors to determine grand strategy.20 The British decisionmakers had no real choice but to do something given the abrupt collapse of appeasement strategies after the Germans moved into Czechoslovakia and the outraged domestic response within Britain that threatened the survival of the Chamberlain government. In Rosecrance and Steiner's words, a line had to be drawn to prevent the next German challenge even if the line had no military teeth. The line could not have been drawn in 1938 because British public opinion would not have allowed it; by March 1939, British public opinion insisted upon it.

Such an explanation can be harnessed readily to accounting for the argument summarized in Table 1 to account for the movement away from an appeasement strategy. It is the assumption that internal and external factors should have equal weight in generating predictions that is at fault. In this case, internal facilitation was the more important factor in overcoming the

constraints perceived by British decisionmakers. Yet, while such a finding may be appealing in part out of recognition for an analytical history of slighting domestic factors in foreign policy making, it also has its problems. The German movement into Czechoslovakia despite the 1938 Munich agreement did arouse anti-German sentiment among the British public, but it also reflected a less ambiguous indicator of the extent of German threat. Before Czechoslovakia, some could argue that German goals were limited to reconstituting a greater Germany and reuniting Germans in central Europe. After the Prague coup, this argument was much more difficult to sustain. Thus, keeping in mind the inventory of plausible factors in Table 2, how do we know that we should not give primary theoretical credit to a less ambiguous external threat or to some combination of facilitating changes in external threat and internal opinion?

There is no point in leaving this last question as rhetorical. Both internal and external factors were at work. It is difficult to see how an analyst should choose to give one type more weight than the other. There is, however, still another way of looking at what transpired in March 1939 that suggests a solution to the puzzles associated with this famous episode in the history of deterrence. After learning of the Prague coup, the initial inclination of the Chamberlain government was to do nothing. To head off a domestic challenge to Chamberlain’s leadership and cabinet, however, something different had to be done. Just what should be done was unclear and no one initially thought in terms of a guarantee to Poland. Instead, it emerged in a combination of trial-and-error foreign-policy fumbling and some inadvertence. The fumbling was fueled by bad information and the perceived needs to look for allies and to constrain Polish rather than German options. Thus, in response to an increase in perceived external threat, public opinion triggered a search for new policy. It did not dictate what form that new policy might take but the initial impulse was to search for allies—a move toward cell B in Table 1 and away from cell D.


Shortly after the information on Czechoslovakia was registered, the British government was informed, inaccurately as it turned out, that Romania and its oil resource constituted the next German target. To counter this specific threat and to respond to domestic demands to be seen doing something, the initial British policy amounted to contacting a number of states in eastern Europe about the possibility of consulting and coordinating some response to further German expansion. In particular, Britain hoped to enlist the Soviet Union and Poland, in addition to France, in responding to an attack on Romania. The response would not necessarily be strong or military in form and did not hinge on German territorial expansion—that was something to be worked out if events forced the question. The wording of the proposed declaration focused on threats to the “independence” of European states, and not their territorial integrity. In other words, further appeasement/conciliation was still conceivable in response to minor territorial expansion.

The problem quickly reduced itself to a tradeoff between Poland and the Soviet Union. Poland bordered on German territory and the Soviet Union did not. The Soviet Union was willing if Poland was prepared to join the group. Poland, however, balked, as did Romania, at anything that might threaten the movement of Soviet troops into their territory. Poland was also reluctant to act openly for fear that it might precipitate an attack by Germany. Consequently, and in conjunction with Polish reluctance to discuss its ongoing negotiations with Germany over Danzig, there was also considerable British concern that Poland might choose to make a separate arrangement with Germany.

The sense of crisis was heightened by the German seizure of the Lithuanian port of Memel on 23 March. On 24 March, Poland rejected the idea of a British, French, Soviet, and Polish pledge to consult over any new threats. On 29 March, France and Britain proposed to Poland and Romania that the two Western powers would provide assistance if either east European state was attacked, along with the proviso that Poland would also assist Romania and vice versa depending upon who was attacked first. Yet neither Poland nor Romania was particularly eager to promise aid to each other. At roughly the same time (28 and 29 March), information from different sources was received by the British government that Germany was...

about to attack Poland. Emergency cabinet meetings were convened on 30 and 31 March to discuss what an appropriate response to a German attack on Poland might be. The concerns that were voiced tended to center on the domestic political ramifications of another embarrassment to British foreign policy and the equally threatening possibility of a German-Polish deal that would increase the vulnerability of the western front.

On 31 March, Britain announced its guarantee to assist Poland if its independence was threatened and if it chose to respond to the threat with military resistance. By this point, it was no longer clear that a German attack was imminent. Nor had there been any discussion of how Britain or France would provide military assistance or even what they would do if a German attack did come about. The guarantee was also accompanied by British press editorials, possibly encouraged by governmental sources, that gave the appearance of softening any possible perception of provocation. The line drawn in the sand was not too firmly established. Nevertheless, Poland ultimately accepted the offer on 4 April.

Thus what began as a British attempt to bring four or more states together to discuss what they might do if German expansion continued toward Romania slipped its way into a guarantee of Polish independence without the benefit of anything that resembled a rational, cost-benefit analysis. Not only Romania, the original threat target, but also the Soviet Union, the largest military power in the eastern European area, somehow fell out of the deterrence equation along the way, albeit temporarily. They were pushed aside because the Poles distrusted the Russians more than they feared the Germans and because the British distrusted the Poles while at the same time sympathized with the Polish distrust of the Soviets. The felt need to do something quickly in order to deflect domestic political pressures, to lessen the likelihood of Polish bandwagoning, and to dissuade the Germans from further coercive expansion also was important. The guarantee was discussed in deterrence terms by British decisionmakers, but there is some doubt that its main purpose was to deter a no longer expected German attack. The other salient motivations—safeguarding the tenure of Chamberlain’s government and discouraging a Polish-German agreement—appear more potent. The room for interpretation left open by the guarantee and the lack of accompanying military planning suggest at least that the deterrent signal was not the most important element in the announcement on 31 March.

24 Both Parker, Chamberlain and Appeasement: British Policy and The Coming of the Second World War, 214; and Newman, March 1939, 219, stress that the Polish guarantee was designed to prevent a German-Polish agreement rather than to deter a German attack.
Despite the deterrence rhetoric of the British decisionmakers, there must be some doubt as to whether this case even qualifies as a deterrence episode. Lebow and Stein have suggested that immediate deterrence requires the satisfaction of two conditions: 1) evidence that a challenger contemplated an attack; and 2) a public commitment on the part of a defender that defines what is unacceptable behavior, specifies how transgression will be punished, demonstrates resolve to carry out the punishment, and is backed up by appropriate capability. A third condition defines success (the challenger backs away from an attack because it fears the threatened punishment) or failure (the challenger attacks in spite of the deterrence or the defender backs down due to subsequent threats from the challenger).

Germany was not contemplating an attack on Poland in March and the British guarantee came only after they had concluded that the attack was not as imminent as they initially thought. The commitment was certainly public but vague on details as to what was unacceptable and what the response might be if a transgression did occur. The resolve dimension is rendered murky by the multiple motivations for the guarantee. What is most clear is that the British did not have the capability to defend Poland and everyone presumably knew it. If the March 1939 guarantee was thus an act of deterrence, it was hardly a straightforward one.

Rather than dwell too long on this question of deterrence qualifications, suffice it to say that March 1939 can best be interpreted as an awkward and not particularly strong movement away from appeasement/conciliation in Table 1's cell D toward resistance with or without allies in cell B. The movement began as an attempt to create an east European coalition and was sidetracked into a guarantee of Polish independence. Throughout most of the period prior to September 1939, the British government hovered on the cusp between cells D and B, without clearly being in one or the other. They ended up in cell B because the Germans eventually attacked Poland in such a way that the degrees of freedom implicit to the March guarantee could not be exercised.

Where does this leave the theoretical question of movement within the four cells of Table 1? Domestic politics worked as an important stimulus to

25. See Lebow and Stein, "Deterrence: The Elusive Dependent Variable," 342-44.
26. Whether the Second World War was inevitable or not is not a question that is being pursued in this essay. For a different stance, see Dale C. Copeland, "Deterrence Reassurance, and Machiavellian Appeasement: Was the Second World War Inevitable?" (paper presented at a Security Studies conference on "Deterrence After the Cold War: Theoretical Perspectives and Policy Implications of Enduring Rivalries," Naval Postgraduate School, Monterey, California, 13-15 September 1995). The theoretical framework developed in this article, however, would suggest at least that its outbreak was highly probable.
move Chamberlain away, however reluctantly, from his preferences for avoiding provoking the Germans and continuing negotiations. Domestic politics forced, if not a search for new policy, at least the search for the appearance of a new policy. Therefore, a change in internal factors helped push British behavior away from appeasement in cell D, but so did the desire to constrain Polish behavior. As a consequence, internal factors cannot take all of the explanatory credit. It also needs to be emphasized that German behavior, another external factor, also contributed to the movement from appeasement to resistance. If the Germans had attacked in September in a way that could be construed as nonthreatening to Polish independence, we might have a different deterrence story to contemplate.

Both internal and external influences were important, along with the usual pathologies of crisis decision making, in generating change in the British-German interaction over Poland. From this interpretative vantage point, the theory developed to account for militarized challenges of system leaders and their political-economic orders seems flexible enough to accommodate even such a tough case as the 1939 case. As long as one recognizes that deterrence situations are not necessarily static confrontations of challengers and defenders over fixed objectives, what happened in 1939 does not appear quite as anomalous as it is sometimes portrayed. With the advantages of hindsight, we can reconstruct what seems to have taken place and situate it within a general explanatory framework. It takes more than a single case, however, to validate a theoretical framework.

The least predictable element in this type of analysis is the trial-and-error fumbling of foreign policy options by decisionmakers as they try to solve their problems. Two weeks before the announcement of the British guarantee of Poland, could anyone have predicted that such an event was probable? The answer is most probably negative. In this sense the specific context in which the deterrence episode emerged is crucial to understanding what was going on. We therefore run some risk in extracting static and relatively abstract challenger-defender confrontations for aggregation purposes. How many other deterrence episodes share the peculiar context and other attributes of the 1939 Polish case? This is not an argument for abandoning theorizing about the history of deterrence outcomes. Examining single cases cannot take us very far beyond the idiosyncrasies of the single case. Obviously, we need to find some middle ground that permits careful aggregation and comparison of sufficiently similar events and is capable of producing nuanced generalizations. That is one reason the current effort is restricted to a specific class of deterrence behavior—the confrontations between declining system leaders and regional challengers.
A hitherto unstated assumption of this essay has been that while rivalries are important, we need to be cautious in not exaggerating the notion that rivalry per se explains a great deal. One of the initial motivations in undertaking this inquiry was an interest in assessing how well the hypothesis that previous behavior between rivals influenced subsequent behavior might fare. More specifically, a failure of deterrence might be explained as a legacy of previous confrontations and lessons learned that a threat from a rival was not to be taken as seriously as threats from nonrivals. The 1939 case in part seemed a good place to begin to explore the power of this hypothesis. Along the way, the story became more complicated and the significance of rivalry appeared to fade. In many respects, however, that may be where the concept of rivalry properly belongs.

Rivalries provide an important type of context in international politics. All possible dyads of interacting states are not equally interesting, important, or dangerous. Some dyads concern actors that have created a relationship of intense competition with strong senses of past, present, and future. Past behavior conditions behavior in the present and calculations about present behavior can be influenced by worries about the shadow of the future. Decision making within rivalry contexts, as a consequence, can be more complicated. The stakes of the rivalry can also render decision making and its outcomes more dangerous. Yet it was possible to devise a simple explanatory framework for challenges of a declining global system leader without seemingly relying much on the concept of rivalry. Does this imply that the concept of rivalry is not all that important to the study of grand strategies or to deterrence? Despite the low profile of rivalry considerations in this article, the answer is still no.

Rivalry has played three distinctive roles in the current version of the 1939 story. It has framed the nature of the confrontation. The related idea of rivalry "evolution" has played an important role in influencing the 1939...
ultimate outcome. Another related idea, rivalry "intersection," has also played an important role. A fourth possible role—that of learning vehicle—does not appear to have been all that critical, except perhaps in the obvious sense that the Germans had no reason to anticipate a vigorous British response in early or late 1939 given either the earlier British behavior in the 1930s or the century of British relative decline which preceded it.

By "framing the confrontation," it is being suggested that it was not inevitable that the 1939 crisis involved Britain and Germany as the central actors. It could have been Germany versus Poland, France, or the Soviet Union. We pay so much attention to 1939 in part because of its apparent connection to the outbreak of the Second World War, but also because it involved a showdown between a hegemonic aspirant in Europe and the declining global system leader which, in turn, could be said to have made the outbreak of the Second World War more probable. Another way of putting this is that the events of 1939 involved a very special structural rivalry between the preeminent state in the central region and the fading preeminent state in the global system. In the absence of this attention to the underlying structural dimension, it is difficult to account for the great destruction that ensued as a consequence of the "failure" of deterrence.

Britain and Germany played their structural roles in a manner not entirely dissimilar to the way they had played their roles in 1914—just as the role playing resembled earlier performances, involving different dyads, in 1792–93, 1688, and the 1580s. One difference, however, was that Britain was well past its prime as the preeminent global actor. It had been eclipsed in the First World War and its pronounced weaknesses in the late 1930s lent an unusual degree of asymmetry to the 1939 confrontation. The problem was that the Anglo-German rivalry in 1939 had evolved into something much different from the rivalry in 1914. Britain and Germany tried to play their "traditional" roles, but the British were really no longer quite up to it and Hitler seems to have appreciated that fact better than anyone else in the principal decision-making circles. The rivalry had persisted despite the continued decline in British relative capability and British foreign policy imperfectly reflected this changing status in the dyadic relationship. Falling back on deterrence guarantees, however, no matter how symbolic the act, was also a reversion to what was expected of a global leader, as were the attempts at building a containment coalition after the Germans had moved into Czechoslovakia. The coalition attempts may have been feeble but they still led more or less directly to the Polish guarantee.

On another plane there is the matter of rivalry "intersection." One of the risks associated with pursuing dyadic rivalry analysis is an overemphasis on
the dyad in question. The deterrence failure, if that is what it was, was not
due solely to the interactions of Britain and Germany. Their interactions
were embedded in a complex field of multiple, intersecting rivalries that
made some difference to the eventual onset of the Second World War. The
very attempt at deterrence could not be made credible because of some of
the rivalries external to the Anglo-German one. In particular, the Anglo-
Russian rivalry, an older one than the Anglo-German one, deserves particu-
lar scrutiny. Given the political instability and conservative military do-
ctrines of the French, successful deterrence of Germany absolutely required
Soviet collaboration. It was not obtained in part because of the British dis-
trust of the Soviet Union that, in turn, reflected a combination of ideolog-
ical distaste closely linked to political polarization in domestic British poli-
tics and the longer history of British-Russian geopolitical antagonisms.

British conciliation, itself, was in some part due to the previously men-
tioned fear that participation in war would only benefit its rivals. There had
also been the earlier-mentioned hope entertained by some British politi-
cians that the German-Russian rivalry could be used either to stabilize
European politics or, failing that, to hold the Soviet threat at bay. Soviet
distrust of the West's motivations, not unrealistically, manifested a fear that
they would indeed end up dealing with the German threat alone.29 The So-
viet Union was also involved in an intense rivalry with Japan over the con-
rol of east Asia that colored its willingness to expose itself to attack on two
different fronts. The British faced a similar problem. The rivalries of the
Japanese with Britain, the Soviet Union, and the United States influenced
how far it was willing to go in aligning itself with Germany. Diplomatic
problems in the Franco-Soviet dyad reflected rival ambitions for leadership
roles in eastern Europe—as did Franco-Italian rivalry. Germany, for its
part, was subject to involvement in an array of rivalries: with Poland and
the Soviet Union over territory in the east, with France and Britain over
predominance in western Europe, and, some would add, with the United
States and the Soviet Union in an anticipated struggle for world predomi-
nance. On the other hand, German decisionmakers had some reason to
expect the history of Polish-Russian antagonisms to reduce the likelihood
of a united front in northeastern Europe. This very complex field of inter-
secting rivalries influenced Anglo-German relations and also made the
British efforts at deterrence less likely to succeed. Indeed, if one were pri-
marily interested in accounting for the outbreak of war in 1939 and its ulti-

29. See A. J. P. Taylor, The Origins of the Second World War, 2nd ed. (Greenwich: Fawcett,
1961), 220.
mate escalation into a world-wide war, the intersection of multiple rivalries is no doubt a more fruitful place for further inquiry than is the concept of deterrence failure.

In a decidedly overdetermined fashion, then, the cumulative effects of rivalry—the framing, the evolution, and the intersection—all contributed to the outcome in 1939. We are thus left with a choice. We can fall back on the parsimony of conventional deterrence theories and point to credibility and capability for our explanation—even though there is some doubt as to whether it is deterrence or something else that provides the primary motivation. If we dig a little deeper, the story becomes more complex, but we can reduce some of that complexity by summing the facilitating and constraining natures of the domestic and external environments. Rivalries are an important shaping feature of the external environment, with both facilitating and constraining potential. Rivalries also impact on the domestic environment. In 1939, they were a significant part of the story even if the attempt at deterrence was probably less significant to the outbreak of war than it is often assumed.

30. Internal rivalries interacting with external rivalries may also be expected in a number of instances.