

NOTES ON PREVENTION AND PREEMPTION

There are four key factors to think about when considering taking an action against someone, whom we believe may do us harm:

- 1) do **they** have the capability to harm us?
- 2) are **they** threatening us with that capability?
- 3) are **they** about to act and harm us?
- 4) what is **our** attitude toward risk?

Of the four, the first three require knowledge about them and fourth, our attitude, requires knowledge about ourselves.

Risk. Our attitude toward risk is basically how much risk can we accept by waiting to act. It has two aspects: our tolerance for risk (how comfortable we are with taking risks in this situation) and our ability to accept the consequences if what we do not want to happen, happens. Decision-makers, when considering action, have varying attitudes toward risk.

Let's use the stock market to illustrate the concept of attitude toward risk.

1) Risk tolerance varies between individuals. Some people are more willing to risk money in stocks than others because of their nature. At one extreme are the gamblers and at the other those who will not put any money into stocks. Risk tolerance also varies according to the circumstances. Even a timid investor would be more willing to invest if he/she saw the likelihood of a return on the investment was very high. But that timid investor might be very willing to take personal risks on a double black diamond trail at Loon Mountain, while the heavy investor would prefer to stay off the slopes.

2) The ability to accept the consequences of things going badly varies according to many factors. If you are in the stock market, for instance, you generally will have a greater tolerance for risk when you are young. You may be able to accept losses, because you may have time to recover before you need the money. If you are old, you may need to ensure that your funds are more safe; you may need them for retirement. On the other hand, the young person may be beginning a family and cannot accept the risks, while the older person may have sufficient to meet the coming needs.

Prevention and Preemption. If the answer to any of the first three factors is no and we act against our enemy, we are acting before there is any effective threat against us.. This is prevention. This is usually not a good course of action. Such an action makes us the instigator of conflict without good justification. It may cause consequences that are undesirable and could be more costly than we wish than waiting. Usually, we should be able to wait to see what happens in their capabilities and behavior.

If, on the other hand, the answer to any of the first three factors is no, but we are very concerned about the risk (have a low tolerance for risk) **OR** if the answer to all the first three factors is yes, then if we act against them, we are acting to preempt their action against us. This is preempting. This can usually be a good course of action. There is justification. We need to ensure the thing we fear does not happen. There maybe consequences that are undesirable, but

the view will probably be that the potential benefits will outweigh the costs, especially the costs of waiting.

Waiting. In considering risk, we should also think along a timeline and the quality of our intelligence about our enemy. As we watch their behavior, is the development of the capability coming close to reaching the point where they have an effective capability? Or are they getting closer to using that capability? If we have confidence in the information about their capability and behavior, we can be more willing to wait along the timeline before we act. If we are not, and especially if our attitude toward risk is low, we may be unable to wait too far along that timeline. What we fear may happen.

For the decision-maker it is not a simple call.

You might wish to think about prevention and preemption related to the Iraq War and the current situation with Iran.