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Trends. Preemption Logics

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Abstract: This Trends article discusses the idea and complexities of preemption in the context of 21st century global terrorism.

Preemption of threat is being heralded as the replacement for containment and deterrence in a 21st century of global terrorism. But the contingencies and linkages related to preemption weave an intricate web and forge a complex maze that may defy human prediction.

For example, in a world of superpower preemption, other political entities have even more reason to emulate the superpower by preempting their own regional threats. What's more, political entities with overt or covert data suggesting that they are on the target list of an incipient preemptor have even more reason and less to lose to preempt the preemptor, including the superpower promulgating preemption as viable national security strategy.

On the other hand, it is the case that preemption can prevent a serious constraining of political and military options. This can be exemplified by the differential United States Government (USG) response towards contemporary threats from Iraq and from North Korea. This differential response is predicated by the existing military capability of North Korea that is primed to effect significant death and destruction for USG regional assets and its regional allies and by the relative lack thereof concerning Iraq. Interestingly, the differential threat status, often used to buttress the arguments of those opposed to preemption against Iraq through the argument that if it fits for Iraq it should fit for North Korea because both are members of the axis of evil, actually subverts such arguments.

One might best analyze the complexity and intricacy of preemption by remembering the Hobbesian rationale for governmental authority to punish. Given a state of nature wherein preemption is the modus operandi, natural laws evolve to escape the preemptive reality. These laws encompass desiring peace and attempting to achieve and defend it, and also, to be contented with the degree of freedom that one would allow others.

Does one defend peace to the extent of engaging in preemption? If one does so, does one not return to the state of nature or encourage its return and violate natural law? And if preemption is encompassed within one's own degree of freedom, can one tolerate it in others? And if not, has one again not returned to and returned the state of nature and again violated natural law?

Perhaps only a superpower or hegemon need be concerned with these questions and even unconcerned with returning to the state of nature. But in a world of globalization and global terrorism, superpower or hegemon status can too easily be countered or neutered.

What remains? In the 21st century do superpowers, hegemons, and other political actors seize the ambivalence of a Hamlet? The nihilism of an Iago? The rapaciousness of a Cassius? What to do in a world in which to preempt or not to preempt is not only the question, but one whose very posing may preempt an answer? (See Bumiller, E. (October 22, 2002). Bush sees Korean nuclear effort as different

International Bulletin of Political Psychology

from Iraq's. The New York Times, p. A6; Chambers, W. (1983). Circumspection, preemption and personal constructs. *Social Behavior and Personality*, 11, 33-35; Kreeger, L. (1992). Envy preemption in small and large groups. *Group Analysis*, 25, 391-408; Masserman, J.H. (1985). Psychosocial pathways and obstacles to peace. *American Journal of Social Psychiatry*, 5, 17-20; Weisman, S. (October 18, 2002). Weighing 'deterrence' vs. 'aggression.' The New York Times, A6.) (Keywords: Political Power, Preemption, Terrorism.)