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When states appease: British appeasement in the 1930s

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Abstract. When do states appease their foes? In this article, we argue that governments are most likely to favour appeasing a foreign threat when their top leaders are severely cross–pressured: when the demands for increased security conflict sharply with their domestic political priorities. We develop the deductive argument through a detailed analysis of British appeasement in the 1930s. We show that Neville Chamberlain grappled with a classic dilemma of statecraft: how to reduce the risk of German expansionism while facing acute partisan and electoral incentives to invest resources at home. For Chamberlain, appeasement was a means to reconcile the demands for increased security with what he and his co-partisans were trying to achieve domestically. We conclude by discussing implications of the analysis for theorising about appeasement and about how leaders make grand strategy more generally.

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Introduction

Few grand strategies puzzle International Relations scholars more than appeasement. Scholars have debated why states put their hopes in seemingly risky attempts to 'buy off' foreign challengers ever since Neville Chamberlain unsuccessfully sought to mollify Adolf Hitler in the 1930s.[1] Today, few analysts subscribe to the once-popular 'guilty men' theory, which attributes appeasement to leaders' personal failings.[2] Instead, two general approaches delineate the contemporary study of appeasement. One suggests that states are most apt to appease a foreign challenger when facing multiple external threats.[3] States, they argue, will sometimes attempt to mollify one

[1] We define appeasement as a strategy of diplomatic concessions aimed at buying off a potential aggressor. It is a purposive strategy designed to achieve international security. See Stephen Rock, *Appeasement in International Politics* (Lexington: University of Kentucky Press, 2000), pp. 10–15. This point, that appeasement can be a credible tool for obtaining external security, is often overlooked. See Paul M. Kennedy, 'The Tradition of Appeasement in British Foreign Policy 1865–1939', *British Journal of International Studies*, 2:3 (1976), pp. 195–215; and Paul W. Schroeder, 'Munich and the British Tradition', *The Historical Journal*, 19:1 (1976), pp. 223–43.

[2] On the historiography of appeasement, see Patrick Finney, 'The Romance of Decline: the Historiography of Appeasement and British National Identity', *electronic Journal of International History* (2000), available at: {http://www.history.ac.uk/ejournal/art1.html}.

[3] Christopher Layne, 'Security Studies and the Use of History: Neville Chamberlain's Grand Strategy Revisited', *Security Studies*, 17:3 (2008), pp. 397-437; Daniel Treisman, 'Rational Appeasment', *International Organization*, 58:2 (2004), pp. 345–73; and John J. Mearsheimer, *The Tragedy of Great Power Politics* (New York: W. W. Norton, 2001), pp. 164–5.

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foe in an effort to concentrate scarce resources against a more dangerous enemy; appeasement is the product of a logic of triage.[4] The other stresses internal, rather than external pressures. In these domestic politics accounts, powerful financial and export-oriented interests worried about the economic and social costs of war pressure national leaders to make diplomatic concessions in hopes of avoiding conflict.[5] For these scholars, appeasement is less about prioritising foreign threats than it is about placating kingmakers at home.

In this article, we offer an alternative explanation for why states appease. We argue that the answer lies at the microfoundational level of individual leaders, where the twin pressures of statecraft and political leadership intersect. Governments are most likely to adopt a strategy of appeasement when their top leaders are severely cross-pressured: when demands for international security conflict sharply with domestic political priorities. Appeasers invariably hold power at times when national security is scarce; they cannot safely discount the risk of foreign aggression. Yet leaders who appease foreign aggressors are also constrained domestically. Economic resources are limited, and leaders run high risks with the electorate (selectorate) if they fail to invest those resources at home. In the context of this specific political configuration, cross-pressured leaders will seek security on the cheap, with appeasement being one way out of this classic dilemma of statecraft – that is, a strategy to obtain an acceptable level of external security while at the same time catering to domestic exigencies.

We test our argument about the salience of international threat and domestic politics against a detailed analysis of British appeasement in the 1930s. While Winston Churchill's admonition at Fulton, Missouri that 'there never was a war in history easier to prevent by timely action than the one which has just desolated such great areas of the globe' may be overstating the case,[6] it is true that many scholars believe World War II could have been averted had Chamberlain acted decisively to contain German revanchism. As such, there is an intrinsic value in understanding Chamberlain's calculus. Yet the Chamberlain case also offers a 'hard test' for our argument that appeasers are leaders who face incentives to invest resources on the home front. As head of the right-of-center Conservative party and a staunch opponent of socialism, it defies conventional wisdom to suggest that Chamberlain faced intractable pressures to invest in butter over guns. Indeed, Chamberlain while Chancellor of the Exchequer had advocated that the Conservatives fight the 1935 general election on the issue of national security, gaining for himself a reputation as something of a hawk on foreign policy.[7] Once Chamberlain became prime minister in May 1937 at the head of a Conservative-dominated National Government with a huge parliamentary majority,

[4] A related realist argument is that leaders will appease a dangerous foe as a temporary measure to 'buy time' to build up their military power. See Norrin M. Ripsman and Jack S. Levy, 'Wishful Thinking or Buying Time? The Logic of British Appeasement in the 1930s', *International Security*, 33:2 (2008), pp. 148–81; and Mearsheimer, *Tragedy of Great Power Politics*, p. 165.

[5] Alexander Anievas, 'The International Political Economy of Appeasement: the Social Sources of British Foreign Policy during the 1930s', *Review of International Studies*, 37:2 (2011), pp. 601–29; Kevin Narizny, 'The Political Economy of Alignment: Great Britain's Commitments to Europe, 1905–39', *International Security*, 27:4 (2003), pp. 184–219; Scott Newton, *Profits of Peace: The Political Economy of Appeasement* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1996); and Sandra Halperin, *War and Social Change: The Great Transformation Revisited* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004), ch. 7.

[6] James W. Muller, *Churchill's 'Iron Curtain' Speech Fifty Years Later* (Columbia: University of Missouri Press, 1999), p. 12.

[7] Keith Feiling, *The Life of Neville Chamberlain* (London: Macmillan, 1946), pp. 268–9; Nick Smart, *Neville Chamberlain* (New York: Routledge, 2010), p. 204.

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why did he not beat a militarist path? We show that weighty domestic imperatives combined with geopolitical factors to shape Chamberlain's decision to appease.

The article is organised into four sections. In the first section, we describe the general conditions under which politically self-interested leaders are most apt to appease a potential aggressor. The next section applies the model to the British case. We explain why Chamberlain saw political advantage in appeasement and why Chamberlain found it difficult to adopt a tougher stance toward Germany, while also taking care to highlight facets of the case that do not fit our model. In the third section, we briefly consider what would have been necessary for Chamberlain to abandon appeasement in favour of a more assertive balancing strategy, drawing on the comparative case of Franklin Delano Roosevelt (FDR) to consider the counter-factual argument. Finally, we conclude by discussing implications for theorising about appeasement and about how leaders make grand strategy more generally.

The political logic of appeasement

Appeasement occurs far more frequently in international politics than balance-of-power logic predicts.[8] Most efforts to explain this 'anomaly' have given pride of place to either the international or the domestic level of analysis. Few scholars have taken the analysis to the level of individual leaders.[9] To some extent, this reflects a view widely held among contemporary International Relations scholars that although individuals do matter from time to time, it is not possible to generalise about their behavior.[10]

We believe that this view is mistaken, and that our understanding of why states sometimes opt to appease their foes can be enhanced by starting from the level of individual statesmen, by viewing leaders as strategic actors who choose their policies (strategies) on the basis of political self-interest. By going to the microfoundational level, it is possible to take into account *Realpolitik's* concern with international power and security and *Innenpolitik's* emphasis on domestic interests and coalitions. Specifically, we model the 'inputs' of a leader's political calculus as deriving from both the international and the domestic spheres, turning core realist and domestic politics insights about the structural determinants of appeasement into a parsimonious – and generalisable – explanatory model.[11] In contrast to extant approaches, then, which tend to privilege a single level of analysis when modeling strategic choice, our

[8] See Paul W. Schroeder, 'Historical Reality vs. Neo-Realist Theory', *International Security*, 19:1 (1994), pp. 108–48; Rock, *Appeasement.* Recognition of this fact has given impetus to a well-developed neo-classical realist literature on the causes of appeasement and the related phenomenon of 'under-balancing'.

[9] Some important exceptions include and Robert Jervis, *Perception and Misperception in International Politics* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1976); Barbara Rearden Farnham, *Roosevelt and the Munich Crisis: A Study of Political Decision-Making* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1997); and Triesman, 'Rational Appeasement'.

[10] Again, there are important exceptions, although none address questions of grand strategy-making. See, for example, Bruce Bueno de Mesquita and Randolph M. Siverson, 'War and the Survival of Political Leaders: A Comparative Study of Regime Types and Political Accountability', *American Political Science Review*, 89:4 (1995), pp. 841–55; Elizabeth N. Saunders, *Leaders at War: How Presidents Shape Military Interventions* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2011); and Giacomo Chiozza and H. E. Goemans, *Leaders and International Conflict* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2011).

[11] For a fuller discussion of the model, see Peter Trubowitz, *Politics and Strategy: Partisan Ambition and American Statecraft* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2011).

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approach posits geopolitical and internal forces as twin engines of statecraft, joint drivers of leaders' strategic choices. In short, self-interested political leaders must, by virtue of their positions, respond to both international and domestic stimuli in relatively equal measure.[12]

Geopolitical slack

Leaders take geopolitics seriously for a simple reason: to do otherwise is to risk their reputations and their hold on political power. As Niccolo Machiavelli warned, 'princes' who misjudge their state's surroundings and capabilities jeopardise their hold on power. The unanticipated rise of a foreign challenger or the failure to take an old or new foe seriously can severely damage a leader's reputation and credibility, at home as well as abroad. Failure or defeat in international affairs throws open the door to domestic opponents and would-be challengers to the throne. In short, demonstrating foreign policy competence matters.

How pressing is this performance constraint? It depends, we argue, on how much slack there is in the external environment. The term 'slack' refers to a country's room for manoeuver in an international system in which power is distributed unevenly; it is measured by the intensity of the threat(s) that a country faces from foreign challengers.[13] Leaders have greater geopolitical slack when their country faces no immediate threat to its physical security, and when the possibility of a rapid and adverse shift in the distribution of power is relatively low. Under such circumstances, decision-makers can treat the international environment as relatively benign, something that bears opportunity rather than portending risk. Leaders have little geopolitical slack when security is scarce and their state is exposed and vulnerable to foreign intimidation and aggression. In this situation, leaders are much more likely to find themselves compelled by their surroundings. In particular, they have strong incentives to move proactively to check challengers and avoid adverse shifts in their geopolitical position that their publics might blame them for, and that both their domestic and foreign adversaries might exploit.[14]

[12] To emphasise, we make no assumption that either international or domestic factors are preeminent. Our approach can thus be differentiated from both *Innenpolitik* and neoclassical realist approaches in that both international structure and domestic politics are modeled as truly independent variables. To the extent that *Innenpolitikers* incorporate international structure into their explanations of foreign policy, it is only as a conditioning force – an intervening variable. See, for example, Narizny, *The Political Economy of Grand Strategy* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2007), pp. 23–4. Neoclassical realist models of foreign policy also only pay attention to domestic politics as intervening variables. See Gideon Rose, 'Neoclassical Realism and Theories of Foreign Policy', *World Politics*, 51:1 (1998), pp. 144–72. Our approach is more similar in spirit to that found in Robert D. Putnam, 'Diplomacy and Domestic Politics: The Logic of Two-Level Games', *International Organization*, 42:3 (1988), pp. 427–60. Like Putnam, we consider how international domestic pressures combine to produce policy – in his case, negotiating stratagems and international agreements. Putnam does not extend this intuition to the making of grand strategy and does not propose a theory of either geopolitical or domestic constraints.

[13] For a similar formulation of threat as a continuum, see Celeste A. Wallander and Robert O. Keohane, 'Risk, Threat, and Security Insitutions', in Helga Haftendorn, Robert O. Keohane, and Celeste A. Wallander (eds), *Imperfect Unions: Security Institutions over Time and Space* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1999), pp. 21–47.

[14] Of course, the level of geopolitical slack in the international environment is not always obvious to contemporary actors or future analysts. Yet leaders and their foreign policy bureaucracies invariably produce assessments of the international scene when governing. For the purposes of our analysis, we rely upon a qualitative understanding of how leaders viewed the geopolitical situation *at the time*.

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Statesmen thus have self-interested reasons for thinking in geopolitical terms,[15] especially when international conditions are unfavourable and the risk of strategic failure and domestic blame is great. Almost invariably, leaders will look for ways to minimise their political exposure to hazardous international environments. How? Balancing is one possible response.[16] It is a defensive strategy that involves efforts to prevent another state from exploiting the *status quo*. One form of balancing involves a leader's efforts to build up his or her state's military capabilities ('internal balancing'). Alternatively, a leader can try to diffuse the threat by pooling resources with other states through forming alliances ('external balancing').

However, balancing is a comparatively expensive type of response, especially the internal variety. Wealth must be taxed, requisitioned, or expropriated, and resources can be hard to extract from a resistant populace or legislature. In this regard, balancing strategies differ sharply from other *status quo* strategies such as appeasement or buckpassing whereby leaders rely on some other state to check potential aggressors.[17] Appeasement and buckpassing require little in the way of taxation or conscription because they lean disproportionately on diplomatic means. This is perhaps most obvious in the case of appeasement, but buckpassing is similar in that it seeks to 'shirk' the costs of deterring (and possibly defeating) the potential aggressor.[18]

Which of these grand strategies, then, will leaders adopt at any given moment? Realists have tended to focus on external considerations: Is the threat urgent? Are suitable allies available? Is another state willing to catch the buck? However, explanations that give pride of place to international circumstances are unhelpful for understanding why leaders sometimes prefer appeasement or buckpassing to internal balancing – that is, why leaders sometimes act contrary to balance-of-power logic. Knowing how much geopolitical slack a leader has tells us something general about how he or she will act, but whether a leader will balance against or appease an external threat depends upon domestic as well as international circumstances.

Guns versus butter

Leaders are not only statesmen; they also head up domestic coalitions or parties, the continued support of which depends in part on the leader's ability to deliver valued goods to their constituents. Modern leaders do many things to gain domestic backing. They set national priorities, work for policies that create jobs, distribute contracts, provide subsidies, and channel investments into projects that will benefit their supporters and strengthen their party's claim to power.

[15] This argument for why leaders respond to external stimuli differs from the *assumption* found in neoclassical realism that leaders respond to systemic imperatives first and foremost (even if via an imperfect 'transmission belt'). See Jeffrey Taliaferro, Steven Lobell, and Norrin Ripsman, 'Introduction: Neoclassical Realism, the State, and Foreign Policy', in Lobell, Ripsman, and Taliaferro (eds), *Neoclassical Realism, the State, and Foreign Policy* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009), p. 4.

[16] Kenneth N. Waltz, *Theory of International Politics* (New York: Random House, 1979); Stephen M. Walt, *The Origin of Alliances* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1987).

[17] On buckpassing, see Barry Posen, *The Sources of Military Doctrine: Britain, France, and Germany between the World Wars* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1984); and Thomas J. Christensen and Jack Snyder, 'Chain Gangs and Passed bucks: Predicting Alliance Patterns in Multipolarity', *International Organization*, 44:2 (1990), pp. 137–68.

[18] We recognise that appeasement and buckpassing differ in important respects. What makes appeasement and buckpassing similar, however, is their shared goal of meeting an external threat at a reduced cost.

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One implication is that a leader's ambition to pursue expensive balancing strategies depends in part upon whether the domestic constituencies whose support is essential to his or her hold on power have a sizeable stake in investing in military strength, as opposed to domestic welfare. If so, expansive (and expensive) strategies for dealing with external threats are much easier to develop and implement. Frequently this is the case, but sometimes a leader's party prefers butter to guns, even in the face of worsening international circumstances. In these instances, when supporters are reluctant to prioritise foreign policies that put a premium on military power, leaders can be expected to favour strategies that place less of a burden on domestic resources. To emphasise, this is not to say that leaders ever can disregard the risks posed by external threats, just that some leaders (those who head butter-oriented coalitions) are wont to favour grand strategies that place less of a financial burden on society than their counterparts who head guns-oriented blocs.[19]

Beyond the distributional consequences of grand strategy, leaders are also mindful of how foreign policy decisions will play among the public at large. Especially in democracies, leaders must secure the political backing of not only partisans but also a decisive slice of the national electorate.[20] Popular attitudes about taxes and nontax opportunity costs are thus important indicators of how much domestic latitude leaders have in making grand strategy.[21] The more resistant the public is to new taxes and conscription, the higher the domestic political hurdles to mobilising military power, and the more restrained leaders are likely to be in setting grand strategy. This means that foreign policies rarely are judged solely on their own merits. Rather, leaders must also consider whether and how foreign policies will affect what they are trying to achieve domestically, something that is especially pertinent when it comes to foreign policies that threaten to expend sizeable quantities of national resources.

Generations of political economists have described this trade-off in stylised terms as the choice between guns and butter. Leaders must decide whether to invest the state's resources in military build-up (guns) or to invest in domestically oriented policies and programmes (butter).[22] As a practical matter, the trade-off is rarely as unbending as modern economic texts portray it to be. Leaders can and often do invest in both guns and butter, relying on increased taxes or large budget deficits to reduce the severity of the trade-off. Still, the guns-versus-butter distinction is a useful reminder that leaders do not make grand strategy in a fiscal vacuum. As the famous American strategist Bernard Brodie put it, '[s]trategy wears a dollar sign.'[23]

[19] This implication of our argument helps to further distinguish it from varieties of realism, which neglect domestic sources of the 'national interest' and instead treat domestic politics as, at best, intervening variables that prevent the national interest from being acted upon. Of course, political parties are not monoliths; they are better seen as composites of blocs of interest groups and voters; how intensively leaders act in accordance with the preferences of their domestic coalitions depends partly on how united the coalitions are. Nor do all groups belong to just a single coalition. Some special interest groups, especially industrial and financial interests, usually attempt to curry favour with multiple potential parties of power and even manipulate domestic opinion beyond membership of partisan coalitions; their influence can thus extend beyond merely comprising one of a leader's several core constituencies.

[20] Even autocratic leaders must cater to the broad contours of the domestic political landscape, however. See Chiozza and Goemans, *Leaders and International Conflict*.

[21] On this point, see Christensen, *Useful Adversaries: Grand Strategy, Domestic Mobilization, and Sino-American Conflict, 1947–1958* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1996), pp. 25–6.

[22] This partly explains why empirical evidence of the tradeoff between defense and welfare is inconsistent. For a useful review of the debate, see Aaron L. Friedberg, 'The Political Economy of American National Strategy', *World Politics*, 41:3 (1989), pp. 387–406; and Steve Chan and Alex Mintz, *Defense, Wealth, and Growth* (London: Routledge, 1992).

[23] Bernard Brodie, *Strategy in the Missile Age* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1965).

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How acute this guns-versus-butter trade-off is depends on many things: economic growth, administrative capacity, and domestic support for or opposition to the extractive policies that finance military spending.[24] In times of plenty, conflicts over national priorities and budget outlays ease, and domestic politics becomes less zero-sum. Leaders who hold power at a time of economic crisis, by contrast, have fewer resources at their disposal and are thus more constrained. Diversionary war theory predicts that it is precisely under these conditions that leaders are most likely to resort to coercive diplomacy or war.[25] Sometimes this prediction holds up. Yet leaders faced with economic crises and tight resource constraints often do the reverse: they look for ways to mollify foreign rivals (appeasement), 'outsource' the demands of security to other nations (buckpassing), or scale back foreign commitments and military expenditures (retrenchment).

Just as leaders have self-interested reasons to think in geopolitical terms, then, political self-interest explains why leaders think about grand strategy in domestic terms, too.[26] When powerful elements within their party see little advantage in militarism, when playing the 'security card' offers little electoral advantage and when fiscal constraints are tight, leaders face political hurdles to the mobilisation of resources for investment in the military. While such leaders are just as sensitive to international threats as their militarist-minded counterparts, they have strong political incentives to find credible and effective strategies for achieving security that avoid placing a heavy burden on domestic resources.

Appeasement as statecraft

We now have the pieces in place to predict when leaders will find it politically advantageous to adopt cost-minimising strategies like appeasement (see Table 1).[27] For these leaders security is scarce. They cannot afford to discount the risk of strategic failure and so must find ways to reduce the nation's vulnerability to potential military attack, economic coercion, and political intimidation. For these same leaders, however, the high cost of investing in military power is an issue. Their party or coalition prefers butter to guns; key constituencies and voters are reluctant to prioritise foreign policies that threaten domestic consumption or require increased taxes.

[24] Paul M. Kennedy, *The Rise and Fall of Great Powers: Economic Change and Military Conflict from 1500 to 2000* (New York: Vintage Books, 1987); Michael Mastanduno, David A. Lake, and G. John Ikenberry, 'Toward a Realist Theory of State Action', *International Studies Quarterly*, 33:4 (1989), pp. 457–74; Alan C. Lamborn, 'Power and the Politics of Extraction', *International Studies Quarterly*, 27:2 (1983), pp. 125–46; and Etel Solingen, *Regional Orders at Century's Dawn: Global and Domestic Influences on Grand Strategy* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1998).

[25] Levy, 'The Diversionary Theory of War: A Critique', in Manus I. Mildarsky (ed.), *Handbook of War Studies* (London: Unwin, Hyman, 1989), pp. 259–88.

[26] One limitation of our approach is that it does not capture the full complexity of interactive effects whereby geopolitics shape party politics and domestic politics affects the external environment (or perceptions of it). Nevertheless, it would be wrong to overstate the co-constituency of the two. Partisan preferences are almost always rooted in endogenous social, economic and political forces, while geopolitics cannot be reduced to the sum of partisan alignments at home and abroad.

[27] Due to limitations of space we describe only the combination of international domestic conditions that lead statesmen to favour cost-minimising strategies like appeasement (scenario III in Table 1). For a detailed discussion of the variations in the types of grand strategy in Table 1 (for example, balancing, expansionism), and the international and domestic conditions that produce them, see Trubowitz, *Politics and Strategy*, pp. 31–43.

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		Geopolitical slack	
		Scarce	Abundant
Party preferences	Guns	Scenario I: Balancing • Internal balancing • Defensive war	Scenario II: Expansionism • Expansionism • Imperialism • Wars of conquest
	Butter	Scenario III: Satisficing • Appeasement • External balancing • Buckpassing	Scenario IV: Underextension • Retrenchment • Isolationism

Source: Adapted from Trubowitz, *Politics and Strategy*, p. 31.

Table 1. *Strategic choice scenarios and associated grand strategies*

Whereas the leaders of other parties might be able to implement strategies of internal balancing, appeasers fall into the category (scenario III in Table 1) of leaders who cannot; they are leaders under great pressure to invest at home. Under such circumstances, there is a pressing need to find strategies that promise satisfactory levels of external security but which will not jeopardise important domestic objectives. Leaders are thus inclined to rely on grand strategies that do not place a heavy burden on domestic resources and that attach greater weight to diplomacy than force, yet still offer the prospect of success in terms of achieving an acceptable level of external security (or at least the avoidance of humiliation, capitulation, or war). In short, appeasers are leaders who need security on the cheap.

British appeasement in the 1930s

In this section, we test the argument through an analysis of British grand strategy before World War II.[28] Overall, we show that, as prime minister in the late 1930s, Neville Chamberlain confronted the timeless tradeoff delineated above: how to ensure external security with limited means. Chamberlain viewed Hitler's ambitions and diplomacy with wariness and misgivings. He could not afford the political risk of ignoring the danger. At the same time, domestic politics created strong pressure to find an inexpensive way to reduce the nation's strategic exposure. As we show, Chamberlain led a party eager to avoid war and to devote scarce government resources to domestic ends. Appeasement thus emerged as the favoured strategy for dealing with the rise of Germany as a hard-headed and calculated response to an unforgiving set of political circumstances.

[28] We contribute to a growing literature that explains grand strategy during this period with reference to both domestic and international politics, although our argument differs in important ways from this (mostly neoclassical realist) work. See, for example, Randall L. Schweller, *Unanswered Threats: Political Constraints on the Balance on Power* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2006); and Taliaferro, Ripsman, and Lobell (eds), *The Challenge of Grand Strategy*. For a political economy (domestic politics) explanation of British appeasement in the 1930s, see Anievas, 'The International Political Economy of Appeasement'.

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Geopolitics: The German problem

Realist accounts of the period make clear that Chamberlain had little geopolitical slack and that this fact was not lost on him.[29] As early as 1934, Chamberlain had singled out Germany as 'the enemy to watch'.[30] Part of this intuition had to do with Chamberlain's private misgivings about the Nazi regime. Worries about British vulnerability to strategic bombing were another factor.[31] More fundamentally though, it had to do with the dangers that a general European war posed to Britain's strategic position and economic welfare. With Britain's economy and finances still reeling from World War I and the Great Depression, Chamberlain worried that a costly war to contain German expansion – even if fought alongside allies – could easily come at the price of Britain's empire, status as a leading Great Power,[32] domestic standards of living and the Conservative Party's electoral majority.

The prevailing geopolitical landscape meant that the risk of entanglement in a European conflagration was not to be taken lightly. For one thing, France's attachment to the Versailles and Locarno settlements put it on a collision course with German revisionism. The Central and Eastern European nations that directly stood to lose from German revanchism were also staunchly *status quo*.[33] Chamberlain recognised that a diplomatic crisis involving this *status quo* bloc of nations on Germany's borders could easily draw Britain into a war not of its own choosing.[34] The desire to avoid sparking a war with Germany was thus a major national security objective for Chamberlain. This helps to explain why Chamberlain found it difficult to implement a successful strategy of external balancing to deal with the German threat: instead of deterring war, extending security guarantees to other countries risked emboldening hardliners in foreign capitals who might provoke Hitler and thus make war more likely.

Other potential allies against Germany came with their own risks. Italy had drifted towards Berlin and Tokyo in the wake of its invasion of Abyssinia, and the price that Mussolini demanded for realigning Rome's interests with London's was too high for any British leader to condone.[35] For its part, the US was absent from

[29] Layne, 'Security Studies', pp. 404–5; Ripsman and Levy, 'Wishful Thinking', pp. 159–63; Schweller, *Unanswered Threats*, p. 73.

[30] Feiling, *The Life of Neville Chamberlain*, p. 253.

[31] See Frank McDonough, *Neville Chamberlain, Appeasement and the British Road to War* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1998), p. 35.

[32] Andrew David Stedman, *Alternatives to Appeasement: Neville Chamberlain and Hitler's Germany* (London: I. B. Tauris, 2011), pp. 157–8.

[33] While the Locarno Treaties (1925) reaffirmed the Versailles settlement's demarcation of borders in Western Europe, they left unanswered the question of Eastern European borders, heightening fears in Eastern European capitals that Germany's eastward expansion was tacitly approved by the Western powers.

[34] Just weeks before Munich, Chamberlain explained to his sister: 'I am satisfied that we should be wrong to allow the most vital decision that any country could take, the decision as to peace or war, to pass out of our hands into those of the ruler of another country and a lunatic at that.' Robert Self (ed.), *The Neville Chamberlain Diary Letters Volume 4: The Downing Street Years, 1934–1940* (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2005), p. 344. On Chamberlain's reluctance to extend security guarantees to the Netherlands, see Roger Parkinson, *Peace for Our Time: Munich to Dunkirk – The Inside Story* (New York: MacKay, 1972), pp. 93–7. On restraining the Poles over Danzig, see A. J. P. Taylor, *The Origins of the Second World War* (London: Hamish Hamilton, 1961), pp. 221–2. On Chamberlain's need to restrain allies more generally, see Stedman, *Alternatives*, pp. 156–7.

[35] Following Hitler's invasion of Czechoslovakia, Chamberlain reached out to Mussolini but was informed that Italy would only intercede on Britian's behalf conditional on territorial concessions from France. Self, *Diary Letters*, p. 394, fn. 53.

[36] C. A. Macdonald, *The United States, Britain and Appeasement* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1981).

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European affairs for most of the 1930s, and Chamberlain was loath to cede global influence to the Americans as the price of their assistance.[36] Even the Dominions were reluctant to commit to opposing Hitler unless diplomacy had run its course.[37] A short-lived form of external balancing against Germany had been attempted in 1934 via the so-called 'Stresa Front' of Britain, France, and Italy. However, when German expansionism was at its prewar height in 1938 and 1939, the window for effective external balancing appeared closed; potential allies were thin on the ground, often torn between balancing against and bandwagonning with Germany, and Chamberlain himself was hamstrung by the need to contain Hitler but also restrain those who would provoke him.

The (im)possibility of bringing the Soviet Union into a Grand Alliance against Germany warrants particular investigation, not only because it was mooted at the time but also because its failure to materialise is used as evidence by some scholars that Britain's political class was driven to appease Germany because of ideology rather than orthodox military-security calculations.[38] In fact, the failure of an Anglo-Soviet alliance to emerge only highlights the inauspicious security environment within which Chamberlain was operating. Moscow was (with some justification) seen as an unreliable partner by diplomats in London, with contemporaries accusing the Soviets of negotiating in bad faith and consistently upping the price of their involvement in any anti-Nazi pact. The Soviet leadership, of course, had good reasons to mistrust Britain; after all, British troops had, in Churchill's words, fought to 'strangle at birth' the Russian revolutionary regime during 1918–20. Furthermore, an alliance involving the Soviet Union was impracticable given that Poland, whose cooperation would be essential to forcing Germany to fight a war on two fronts, refused to countenance Soviet troops on its territory.[39]

The explanation that Chamberlain failed to conclude an alliance with Moscow because of elite anticommunism misses these harsh geopolitical realities. Furthermore, if Britain's elite was motivated by a singular desire to defeat communism at home and abroad, why not cultivate greater ties of friendship with Germany and the other fascist powers instead of pursuing the appeasement and limited deterrence? It also overstates the case to suggest that Chamberlain's actions amounted to an historic renunication of Britain's timeless role of special 'balancer'.[40] In fact, Chamberlain's policies *vis-à-vis* Germany were precisely aimed at maintaing a balance power in Europe – albeit through the redress of German grievances and by avoiding measures that would swell the Soviet Union's influence. Again, the point for Chamberlain was not to find allies to win a war with Germany (if war had been thought inevitable then an alliance with the Soviet Union might well have materialised) but rather to find a diplomatic settlement that would maintain a stable peace. Last, domestic (including elite) support for alliance with Moscow exploded following Hitler's invasion of Czechoslovakia (up to 87 per cent of the public was in favour of

[37] Ritchie Ovendale, *'Appeasement' and the English-Speaking World: Britain, the United States, the Dominions and the Policy of 'Appeasement', 1937–1939* (Cardiff: University of Wales Press, 1975).

[38] Halperin, *War and Social Change*; Anievas, 'The International Political Economy of Appeasement'.

[39] Stedman, *Alternatives*, pp. 122, 150–3, 159–60. It is worth noting, however, that London did not bring the full force of British diplomacy to bear to force the Poles to accept Soviet war assistance. Anievas, 'The International Political Economy of Appeasement'.

[40] Halperin, *War and Social Change*, p. 200.

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an alliance with Moscow in April 1939) and Chamberlain himself did sanction overtures towards his end.[41] In the event, no alliance was forthcoming – not because of British indifference but because of the very real geopolitical complexities described above.

Overall, geopolitical slack was scarce for Chamberlain in the late 1930s: Germany presented a very real threat to British national security and the overall stability of Europe, and potential allies were few and far between. Partly as a response to this geopolitical environment, Chamberlain turned to diplomacy as a means to pacify Germany. Geopolitics alone, however, cannot fully explain why Chamberlain sought security through appeasement, or why he did not select an alternative strategy to reduce the nation's strategic exposure, such as building up Britain's military (internal balancing). In weighing his options, Chamberlain had to consider how geopolitical choices would affect his domestic priorities.

Rearmament versus recovery

Though he is mostly remembered today for his foreign policy, Chamberlain himself viewed his succession to prime minister as the capstone to a long career as a domestic reformer.[42] In local politics and on the national stage, Chamberlain had consistently taken a keen interest in matters of public health, housing, social insurance, and reform of local government. Even as prime minister during tempestuous times, Chamberlain orchestrated domestic legislation on social insurance, factory working conditions, housing, and physical training. As late as the outbreak of war itself, Chamberlain was developing policy on London transport and masterminding the creation of a vast government agency to coordinate economic activity.[43] These domestic achievements were central to Chamberlain's success as a politician, as well as to the success of his party.

First and foremost, Chamberlain understood that the Conservative Party's fortunes depended upon the success of its economic recovery plans.[44] For Chamberlain, this meant adhering to financial orthodoxies. It is in this context that Chamberlain insisted 'defence spending [be] confined to priorities, [be] within manageable limits and ... above all [be] rendered acceptable to a highly sensitive public opinion',[45] caveats that translated into considerable limits on defense spending. Cutting existing government expenditure to pay for armaments was deemed inappropriate because of 'the risk of resulting social unrest'.[46] Increased taxes were also ruled out as antibusiness and antirecovery, with one Treasury official in 1935 professing the country to be 'taxed

[41] Stedman, *Alternatives*, pp. 134, 156.

[42] 'Almost certainly', writes historian David Dutton, 'Chamberlain himself would have wished to be remembered as a domestic reformer. Had his career been cut short at any time before 1937 this is almost certainly how things would have turned out.' David Dutton, *Neville Chamberlain* (London: Arnold, 2001), p. 192.

[43] Feiling, *Life of Neville Chamberlain*, p. 307.

[44] For good overviews of Chamberlain's views of the economy, see George C. Peden, *British Rearmament and the Treasury* (Edinburgh: Scottish Academic Press, 1979); and Robert Paul Shay, *British Rearmament in the Thirties* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1977).

[45] Smart, *Neville Chamberlain*, p. 204.

[46] Shay, *British Rearmament*, p. 160; Derek H. Aldcroft, *The Inter-War Economy: Britain, 1919–1939* (London: Batsford, 1970), p. 302. The cabinet formally agreed in March 1936 that rearmament must 'be carried out without restriction on social services'. See Peden, *British Rearmament*, p. 89.

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to full capacity'.[47] In the event, Chamberlain agreed in 1937 to a £400 million loan to finance rearmament but additional borrowing was anathema to the generally accepted orthodoxy of achieving a balanced budget. Officials further worried that inflation-through-borrowing would create unrest among wage earners, threatening not only 'national security, but [also] the whole social order'.[48] What is more, Chamberlain's advisers cautioned that employing construction firms to build new munitions factories would reduce private housing construction, one of the flagship engines of economic recovery,[49] while also damaging Britain's balance of trade.[50]

The upshot was that a foreign policy of internal balancing would be a very tough sell domestically and highly risky to the Conservatives. To be sure, Chamberlain was not averse to military spending *per se*. Indeed, he presided over increases in defense spending during both his tenure as Chancellor (1931–7) and as prime minister. Rather, for Chamberlain the challenge was to pursue rearmament in an affordable and politically acceptable way.[51] This meant avoiding moves that might threaten needed domestic reforms (the guns-versus-butter trade-off) or that might jeopardise economic recovery. The result was a 'twin' foreign policy of deterrence and détente, with limited rearmament (mostly in terms of air and naval forces) adopted as a complement to diplomacy – not, as some would have it, an alternative.[52]

The electoral connection

Partisan and electoral incentives to pursue appeasement reinforced economic ones. The Conservatives' primary constituencies were the landed aristocracy and the trade and finance sectors – sectors that made up what P. J. Cain and A. G. Hopkins famously called the 'gentlemanly capitalists'.[53] These sectors were heavily invested

[47] Peden, *British Rearmament*, 74. See also Shay, *British Rearmament*, p. 160: '[i]t was universally agreed that any effort to rely on taxation to finance rearmament would lead the nation straight back into the depression.'

[48] Shay, *British Rearmament*, p. 161. This point is stressed in Halperin, *War and Social Change* and Anievas, 'The International Political Economy of Appeasement'. We agree that resolve to preserve the stability of British society was a driving force behind Chamberlain's desire for peace. Nevertheless, anticommunism alone is underdetermining. Unfettered anticommunist sentiment would likely have pushed Britain into an alliance with Germany, as indeed some on the far-right advocated in the 1930s, instead of the stand-offish, mutually suspicious relationship that actually characterised the era of appeasement.

[49] Peden, *British Rearmament*, pp. 83–4, 93. On the importance of housing to Britain's economic recovery, see Newton, *Profits of Peace*, pp. 45–6; and H. W. Richardson, *Economy Recovery in Britain, 1932–9* (London: Weidenfeld and Nicolson, 1967), pp. 153–81. In any case, acute labour shortages made extensive rearmament impracticable in many areas. Peden, *British Rearmament*, pp. 81–2.

[50] Officials feared that lucrative defense contracts would draw British industry's attention away from overseas markets, worsening Britain's balance of trade – indeed, doubly so, given that rearmament itself would require an increase in imported raw materials. On the connection between defense spending and foreign trade, see Peden, *British Rearmament*, pp. 63, 85–5. See also Layne, 'Security Studies', pp. 406–7.

[51] According to Nick Smart, '[p]rovided defence spending was confined to priorities, was kept within manageable limits and was above all rendered acceptable to a highly sensitive public opinion, he [Chamberlain] was for it.' Smart, *Neville Chamberlain*, p. 204.

[52] See, for example, Newton, *Profits of Peace*, p. 73; Layne, 'Security Studies', p. 402. As Peden notes, rearmament was not pursued in 'preparation for war at any specific date', but for the purposes of deterring a German attack against Britain. Peden, *British Rearmament*, p. 65. 'What you want', Chamberlain explained in 1939, 'are defensive forces sufficiently strong to make it impossible for the other side to win except at such a cost as to make it not worth while [*sic*].' Daniel Hucker, *Public Opinion and the End of Appeasement in Britain and France* (Farnham: Ashgate, 2011), p. 186.

[53] P. J. Cain and A. G. Hopkins, *British Imperialism 1688–2000* (2nd edn, Harlow: Pearson, 2002).

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in British imperialism and while they pressured Chamberlain to give pride of place to protecting the empire, they preferred low-cost methods of doing so.[54] These same sectors, especially commerce, had a direct stake in maintaining peace and economic cooperation with Germany. As Scott Newton observes, 'some of the most important commercial interests at the heart of the City were dependent on *détente* with Germany'.[55] The Conservative core's strong preferences for good working relations with Germany constituted an 'institutional bias' against conflict (or, indeed, disengagement). Chamberlain himself noted this inextricable link between politics and economics in a speech to Parliament, insisting that

> I do not think it is possible entirely to separate economic from political conditions ... [W]hile undoubtedly the economic problem must always be an important factor in any endeavour to bring about a better state of things in Europe, it is much more likely to receive favourable consideration if it has been preceded by some easing of political tension beforehand.[56]

Electoral exigencies strongly favoured maintaining peaceful relations with Germany. At least since the 1918 Representation of the People Act, winning working-class votes had become essential for returning the Conservative Party to office.[57] Because of Britain's first-past-the-post electoral system, winning parliamentary elections – then as now – was not a question of national vote share but of winning in particular 'battleground' seats.[58] For the Conservatives, this meant reaching out beyond their traditional base and winning over predominantly working-class seats. Placating the working-class pushed Chamberlain towards appeasement as a strategy in several ways. Not least of all, it meant maintaining Conservative support for social spending ('butter').[59] Because working-class voters tended to oppose war and profiteering by the arms industry, and strongly supported collective security and the League of Nations, it also meant avoiding foreign policies that might leave the Conservatives open to charges of militarism and or war mongering.[60] See Table 2 for a breakdown of the Conservatives' electoral coalition.

[54] Narizny, *Political Economy*, pp. 159–64, 168–71. The gentlemanly capitalists' commitment to fiscal orthodoxy also lent tacit support to the rationing of defense spending. See Cain and Hopkins, *British Imperialism*, pp. 448–9, 479–81.

[55] Newton continues: 'the material interests of the most powerful and prestigious part of the City were wrapped up with the maintenance of [Anglo-German relations]', providing 'a rationale for economic *détente* which was not motivated by fear' but by interest. Newton, *Profits of Peace*, p. 58. See also David Kaiser, *Economic Diplomacy and the Origins of the Second World War* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1980); Cain and Hopkins, *British Imperialism*, p. 482.

[56] Hansard, HC Deb (21 December 1937), available at: {http://hansard.millbanksystems.com/commons/1937/dec/21/foreign-affairs#column_1805}.

[57] The 1918 Act tripled the size of the British electorate, allowing all males and women over the age of thirty to vote. On the importance of the working-class vote to the Conservatives, see Andrew J. Taylor, 'Stanley Baldwin, Heresthetics and the Realignment of British Politics', *British Journal of Political Science*, 35:3 (2005), pp. 429–63; Philip Williamson, '"Safety First": Baldwin, the Conservative Party, and the 1929 General Election', *Historical Journal*, 25:2 (1982), pp. 385–409; and B. J. C. McKercher, 'National Security and Imperial Defence: British Grand Strategy and Appeasement, 1930–1939', *Diplomacy & Statecraft*, 19:3 (2008), p. 395.

[58] In 1922 the Conservatives won 344 seats in the House of Commons (a majority) on 38.5 per cent of the nation vote, but in the following year's general election they were reduced to 258 seats with 38 per cent.

[59] John Ramsden, *An Appetite for Power: A History of the Conservative Party Since 1830* (London: HarperCollins, 1998), pp. 261, 288–9, 291.

[60] Kennedy, *Realities Behind Diplomacy: Background Influences on British External Policy, 1865–1980* (London: Allen & Unwin, 1981), pp. 240–5. As Daniel Hucker notes, Chamberlain firmly believed (and justifiably so) that working-class sentiment was behind his policy of appeasement. See Hucker, *Public Opinion*, pp. 30–41.

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	Preferences, post-1931			
	Fiscal	Foreign trade	Europe	Empire
Core supporters				
Gentry	Low spending; balanced budget	Imperial Preference	Subordinate to empire	Protect the Empire
Finance	Low spending; balanced budget	Freer trade; cooperation with Germany	Peace and cooperation with Germany	Protect the Empire; but not to exclusion of European markets
Enlarged coalition, necessary for parliamentary majorities				
(Small) business	Balanced budget, but agnostic towards social spending	Freer trade; exports to Germany and its growing sphere of influence	Peace and stability in Europe	Protect the Empire but engage in European markets
Working-class	Maintain and increase social spending, but wary of inflation	Support for protectionism vs free trade varying by region	Internationalism varying by region, but generally pro-collective security and League of Nations	Imperialist sentiment varying by region

Table 2. *The Conservatives' coalitional base*

Experience and basic electoral arithmetic showed that the Conservatives could offend working-class sensibilities only at great electoral risk.[61] Even a clean sweep of seats in London and the South of England (where working-class preferences tended to reflect those of the export and financial services sectors) was not enough to deliver a parliamentary majority for the Conservative Party.[62] As such, Chamberlain could not neglect voters in the North of England and in Wales, where the contintental-oriented coal mining and manufacturing industries prevailed and working-class voters were staunchly internationalist in outlook. Still less could Chamberlain ignore the working-class's general opposition to rearmament or its faith in the League of Nations.[63] As Tables 3 and 4 illustrate, even small movements in the popular vote could spell electoral disaster for the Conservatives during the interwar period. Strong electoral performances in manufacturing regions like the North of England and the Midlands were essential to delivering parliamentary majorities. Towards this end,

[61] This is one of the lessons that Chamberlain and other Conservatives took from the party's punishing defeats in 1923 and 1929. See Ramsden, *Appetite for Power*, p. 272.
[62] Those regions contained 209 seats, excluding university seats, while 308 seats were needed for a majority.
[63] On the regional breakdown of the British electorate, see J. P. D. Dunbabin, 'British Elections in the Nineteenth and Twentieth Centuries, a Regional Approach', *English Historical Review*, 95:375 (1980), pp. 241–67; and Narizny, *Political Economy*.

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Election	Conservatives	Labour	Liberal	National Liberal	National Labour
1922	344 (38.5%)	142 (29.7%)	62 (18.9%)	53 (9.9%)	
1923	258 (38%)	191 (30.7%)	158 (29.7%)		
1924	412 (46.8%)	151 (33.3%)	40 (17.8%)		
1929	260 (38.1%)	287 (37.1%)	59 (23.6%)		
1931	473 (55%)	52 (30.8%)	33 (6.5%)	35 (3.7%)	13 (1.5%)
1935	386 (47.8%)	154 (38%)	21 (6.7%)		

Note: F. W. S Craig, British Electoral Facts 1885–1975 (3rd edn, London: Macmillan, 1976).

Table 3. *Seats won in House of Commons (percentage of popular vote in parantheses)*

	S England (144 seats)		London (95 seats)		N England (177 seats)		Midlands (99 seats)		Scotland (71 seats)		Wales (35 seats)	
	No.	%	No.	%	No.	%	No.	%	No.	%	No.	%
1922*	90	82.5	62	70.5	73	48.6	53	60.6	13	18.3	5	17.1
1923	60	57	40	48.4	53	34.5	44	49.5	14	19.7	4	11.4
1924*	106	93	58	66.3	79	47.5	71	74.7	36	50.7	9	25.7
1929	85	74.6	40	43.2	55	31.1	38	38.4	21	29.6	1	2.9
1931*	93	90.4	72	81.1	129	79.1	73	77.8	45	67.6	6	17.1
1935*	95	81	57	62.1	100	57.6	63	67.7	33	47.9	6	17.1

* Denotes a Conservative majority in the General Election.

Note: F. W. S Craig, British Electoral Facts 1885–1975 (3rd edn, London: Macmillan, 1976).

Table 4. *House of Commons seats won by the Conservatives, by region (excluding university seats)*

reform – not rearmament – was the order of the day. As John Ramsden comments, Chamberlain's domestic reforms 'provided [Conservative] MPs with a solid diet of policy achievements to take even to their working-class electors when seeking a renewal of their support'.[64] By contrast, policies that risked being perceived as militaristic would have had the very opposite effect.

Innenpolitik characterisations of the Conservatives' interwar base as constituting a City-Treasury-Bank nexus are thus accurate but incomplete.[65] Such a nexus existed, but alone it was not strong enough to deliver the parliamentary majorities necessary to wield power and shut out the Labour Party. In addition to its gentlemanly capitalist core, then, the Conservatives needed the support of large numbers of middle- and working-class voters. Among other things, this meant a foreign policy that did not require cuts to social spending, taxes hikes, or increases in government borrowing. Appeasement as a grand strategy met all of these requirements.

The fact that Chamberlain's domestic opponents could not agree on an alternative to appeasement only made the prime minister's choice easier. Rather than serving as a constraint, this elite split actually empowered Chamberlain.[66] The Labour Party opposed appeasement and arms manufacturing while simultaneously supporting a pact with the Soviet Union and collective security under the auspices of the League

[64] Ramsden, *Appetite for Power*, p. 288.
[65] Cain and Hopkins, *British Imperialism*, p. 426; Newton, *Profits of Peace*, p. 4; Halperin, *War and Social Change*; Anievas, 'International Political Economy of Appeasement'.
[66] See Stedman, *Alternatives*.

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of Nations – impractical solutions both. Churchill, too, supported a 'Grand Alliance' with the Soviets. Other so-called anti-appeasers in the Conservative ranks were actually very much in the appeasement camp, even if they proposed appeasing Japan or Italy instead of Germany.[67] Proponents of other alternatives to appeasement also existed, including isolationists, outright pacifists, and those calling for a pre-emptive war against Germany.[68] Nevertheless, the case for dropping appeasement was not effectively put to Parliament or to the British people.

In the absence of a clear alternative, appeasement's opponents faced an uphill battle when it came to public sentiment. The most systematic account of public opinion during the period suggests that Chamberlain's efforts to avoid war enjoyed broad public support and, importantly, that he was aware of this fact. Using newspaper editorials as his 'paramount' gauge of public opinion,[69] Chamberlain had no reason to suspect that there would be electoral gains from ramping up rearmament above the level that he had deemed to be affordable. On the contrary, there was much to expect from a policy aimed at avoiding war.[70] In 1935, 11 million voters (38 per cent of Britain's adult population) had taken part in the so-called Peace Ballot, creating a significant impression among the elite that the British public was in favour of collective security and in opposition to arms manufacturing.[71] Between 1935 and 1939, Chamberlain saw little to change his mind on this point: in addition to a steady stream of newspaper editorials that broadly confirmed his reading of domestic politics, the fact that the British press and public lined up behind his decision in September 1938 to cede the *Sudetenland* to Germany only buttressed Chamberlain's perception that the public yearned for peace, not rearmament, and still less for war.

Appeasement explained: To Munich and after

British leaders repeatedly acquiesced in Germany's militarisation and expansion during the 1930s, from the reintroduction of German conscription and the Anglo-German Naval Agreement of 1935, to the remilitarisation of the Rhineland in 1936, to Germany's annexation of the *Sudetenland* in Czechoslovakia and even beyond. The strategy of appeasement reached its zenith with Neville Chamberlain as prime minister and principal architect of Britain's grand strategy, with the Munich Pact of September 1938 generally regarded as being the high water mark of appeasement. For Chamberlain, appeasement meant continued diplomatic and economic ties with Germany and the reasonable redress of Germany's security concerns and territorial

[67] As Gustav Schmidt notes, 'neither Churchill nor Eden nor the Labour Opposition offered a genuine alternative to appeasement. They, too, spoke in favour of appeasement on a number of issues; for example, in respect of Italy and Japan.' Gustav Schmidt, *The Politics and Economics of Appeasement: British Foreign Policy in the 1930s* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1986), pp. 9–10.

[68] Stedman, *Alternatives.*

[69] Hucker, *Public Opinion*, p. 20.

[70] Indeed, after assessing public opinion to the best extent possible, Hucker broadly confirms Chamberlain's judgement. Hucker, *Public Opinion*, pp. 30–41. See also George H. Gallup (ed.), *The Gallup International Public Opinion Polls: Great Britain 1937–1975* (New York: Random House, 1976), pp. 1–22 for early polling on attitudes towards war, rearmament and the Chamberlain's leadership; and Kennedy, *Realities Behind Diplomacy*, pp. 240–5.

[71] The 1935 Peace Ballot was considered an unofficial 'referendum' on British membership in the League of Nations, disarmament, and collective security. See Narizny, *Political Economy*, pp. 184–5; and Michael Ceadel, 'The First British Referendum: The Peace Ballot, 1934–5', *English Historical Review*, 95:377 (1980), pp. 810–39.

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grievances. Like Stanley Baldwin before him, Chamberlain was 'striving to preserve the peace of Europe, not to win a war'.[72] As the foregoing discussion has detailed, this policy of appeasement was firmly rooted in a specific configuration of international and domestic incentives.

Consideration of the Munich Pact of 1938, the centerpiece of Chamberlain's efforts to appease Hitler, helps to flesh out Chamberlain's calculus more fully. Munich was the culmination of three visits to Germany by Chamberlain in September 1938, a diplomatic offensive to resolve the German-Czechoslovak crisis known to British officials as 'Plan Z'.[73] The proximate cause of the crisis was Sudeten German demands, actively supported by Hitler, that the region be put under German control. Chamberlain sought to avoid a situation whereby German intervention to 'free' the Sudeten Germans would be met by French mobilisation and, ultimately, British entanglement. The objective of Plan Z was to avert war by conciliating German demands. Chamberlain came away from the negotiations with Hitler convinced that he had not only prevented the outbreak of war, but also had hammered into place a 'method of consultation' to resolve any future differences between between Britain and Germany.[74]

Upon his return from Munich, Chamberlain was feted by crowds jubilant at the aversion of war. Chamberlain even 'enjoyed the exceptional honour of joining the King and Queen on the balcony' of Buckingham Palace before a cheering throng.[75] Newspaper coverage of Munich was effusive in its praise for Chamberlain; taking stock of British press's responses to Munich, Daniel Hucker concludes that 'there was little political profit in criticizing those who had prevented a war that nobody wanted'.[76] Criticism in Parliament was largely reserved for specific terms of the Munich Agreement rather than the overall policy; detractors such as Labour's Clement Attlee were at pains to associate themselves with the British public's relief that war had been averted.[77]

Support for the Munich Agreement was particularly strong within Chamberlain's own party, the prime minister being 'greeted by a standing ovation' as he entered the House of Commons on 3 October.[78] True, a small yet determined group of Conservative MPs expressed reservations about the agreement, but such dissent 'was to the greatest extent kept private', with only a handful of MPs abstaining from a vote of support (which Chamberlain won handsomely).[79] Those that did vocalise their dissent, including Duff Cooper and Churchill, were chastised by their local Conservative Associations, threatened with deselection and the termination of their

[72] Taylor, *Origins*, p. 227.

[73] Plan Z was put into effect after earlier diplomatic initiatives had failed to obtain Czech submission to German demands. See David Faber, *Munich, 1938: Appeasement and World War II* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 2009), p. 239; Paul Vyšný, *The Runciman Mission to Czechoslovakia, 1938: Prelude to Munich* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2003).

[74] Faber, *Munich*, p. 292. Chamberlain himself recorded that he 'didn't care two hoots whether the Sudetens were in the Reich or out of it'. Self, *Diary Letters*, p. 348.

[75] Self, *Neville Chamberlain*, p. 325.

[76] Hucker, *Public Opinion*, p. 57.

[77] Ibid., pp. 58–9.

[78] Neville Thompson, *The Anti-Appeasers: Conservative Opposition to Appeasement in the 1930s* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1971), p. 182.

[79] N. J. Crowson, *Fighting Fascism: The Conservative Party and the European Dictators, 1935–1940* (New York: Routledge, 1997), p. 96. Arguments that the British political class was disunited on appeasement are therefore overstated. Schweller, *Unanswered Threats*, pp. 73–4.

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parliamentary careers: 'the dissenters had to tread carefully if they wanted to stay in the party [and] keep their seats in the House of Commons'.[80] Despite some parliamentary disunity, then, Conservative MPs and the party in the country were broadly supportive of Chamberlain's efforts – so much so, in fact, that some in the party, including the prime minister himself, even entertained the idea of an early election in order to 'gain political capital from Chamberlain's personal prestige'.[81] Confident in his party's backing for a brokered European peace (including concessions to Germany), Chamberlain had little cause to doubt his achievements or his judgment that militarism did not pay.

That Chamberlain stuck to appeasement after Munich, consistently looking for diplomatic solutions to the crises of 1938–9, is indicative of his belief that appeasement enjoyed robust popular support, which, coupled with Chamberlain's emboldened authority within the Conservative Party, created a powerful incentive to 'stay the course' with a view to a securing a comfortable general election victory in 1939. When reports abounded in January 1939 that Germany was planning to invade the Netherlands, Chamberlain resisted any formal commitments that might 'provoke rather than deter Hitler'.[82] That same month, an Anglo-German Coal Agreement was signed to cement economic relations between the two countries in the hope that political relations might also be calmed.[83] Even after the fall of Prague in March 1939, Chamberlain refused to honour Britain's security commitment to Czechoslovakia,[84] and just weeks later the government did nothing in protest over Germany's seizure of Memel from Lithuania.[85] As late as the day after the invasion of Poland in September 1939, Chamberlain's diary letters reveal that he was still actively weighing peace options.[86]

Throughout, Chamberlain was convinced that his policy of appeasement could deliver lasting international security for Britain. He believed that revisions to the Versailles settlement could remove Germany's legitimate grievances without the need for military action by either side. Chamberlain was persuaded that moderates within the Nazi regime could be relied upon to restrain Hitler if diplomatic concessions were forthcoming from the international community.[87] Of course, 'Chamberlain could only carry through his policy of German appeasement if Hitler co-operated',[88] and it is now clear that Hitler was no man of peace. Nevertheless, Chamberlain's relinquishment of appeasement was as gradual as it was reluctant: only when the

[80] Thompson, *The Anti-Appeasers*, p. 195; Crowson, *Fighting Fascism*, p. 104.

[81] Crowson, *Fighting Fascism*, pp. 106–8. The Opposition parties also feared a general election 'while [Chamberlain's] popularity was so great'. Thompson, *The Anti-Appeasers*, p. 184.

[82] Parkinson, *Peace for Our Time*, pp. 93–7.

[83] Martin Gilbert and Richard Gott, *The Appeasers* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1963), pp. 202–3; Newton, *Profits of Peace*, pp. 97–8.

[84] Ian Colvin, *The Chamberlain Cabinet: How the Meetings in 10 Downing Street, 1937–9, Led to the Second World War* (London: Gollancz, 1971), p. 186.

[85] Parkinson, *Peace for Our Time*, p. 122.

[86] Chamberlain was considering a peace plan, proposed by Mussolini, to bring Germany and Poland to the negotiating table and settle the Danzig question. Taylor, *Origins*, pp. 271, 277; Self, *Diary Letters*, p. 443; Sidney Aster, *1939: The Making of the Second World War* (London: Deutsch, 1973).

[87] See Lobell, 'The Second Face of Security: Britain's "Smart" Appeasement Policy Towards Japan and Germany', *International Relations of the Asia-Pacific*, 7:1 (2007), pp. 73–98; and MacDonald, 'Economic Appeasement and the German "Moderates" 1937–1939: An introductory Essay', *Past and Present*, 56:1 (1972), pp. 105–35.

[88] Aster, *1939*, p. 351. On this broader point, see Rock, *Appeasement*.

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international situation got overwhelmingly dangerous, driving public and parliamentary opinion to a boiling point over Nazi bellicosity, did Chamberlain consign appeasement to history and declare the country at war over the issue of Poland's territorial integrity.[89]

Chamberlain was an appeaser because he needed security on the cheap. Chamberlain did not appease Hitler simply to free up capacity to balance against a more pressing foreign adversary, as conventional triage model of appeasement would propose, but rather as a way to neutralise Britain's most pressing geopolitical threat. Nor was British appeasement the straightforward result of lobbying by narrow imperial interests – constituencies that, had they controlled British foreign policy, might even have made common cause with Germany. Instead, Chamberlain chose appeasement because of both geopolitical and domestic pressures. Internal balancing was at odds with Chamberlain's domestic goals, while other cost-saving strategies on which Chamberlain might have relied, such as external balancing, buckpassing, or disengagement, were impractical or counterproductive, or both. Britain was too integrated into the European economy, and Chamberlain's domestic agenda too dependent on stability on the Continent, to countenance a strategy of disengagement or isolationism.

Alternative explanations, domestic counterfactuals, and what ifs

An analysis of the Chamberlain case offers opportunities to evaluate several alternative theories of appeasement. First, the realist arguments that appeasement occurs when states face multiple threats and thus need to engage in 'triage' or else 'buy time' to fight against an emerging challenger have difficulty accounting for Chamberlain's policies. Britain did face multiple threats during the 1930s, but chose to appease its most proximate threat instead of its more distant rivals, Italy and Japan.[90] Meanwhile, our analysis shows that Chamberlain pursued rearmament to strengthen his diplomatic overtures towards Germany and withstand a German first strike, not to fight a balance of power-inspired war against Hitler.

Second, the *Innenpolitik* argument that appeasement was pursued in order to safeguard a particular form of social and economic order at home (that is, an elite-centered capitalist order) fails to explain why Chamberlain did not seek even closer ties with Germany than he actually did, for example by harnessing German power against the supposed Soviet menace. We can also rule out another commonplace *Innenpolitik* suggestion that public aversion to war explains appeasement because the British public's longstanding aversion to war was shattered after events like *Kristallnacht* in November 1938 and the invasion of Czechoslovakia in March 1939, yet Chamberlain persisted with appeasement.[91]

[89] For a good discussion of the shift in public opinion and its impact on British policy, see Richard Rosecrance and Zara Steiner, 'British Grand Strategy and the Origins of World War II', in Rosecrance and Arthur A. Stein (eds), *The Domestic Bases of Grand Strategy* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1993), pp. 124–53.

[90] Although it might reasonably be charged that Italy and Japan posed the more formidable threat to Britain's overseas empire, it is clear that decision-makers in London saw Germany as the chief threat, at least from 1934–5 onwards and certainly by 1937. On this point, see Brian Bond, *British Military Policy Between the Two World Wars* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1980), pp. 93, 93–6, 195, 218–19, 243, 277, 280, 313–14, 316.

[91] On this critical point, see Hucker, *Public Opinion*, pp. 83–4, 87.

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Last, our analysis casts doubt on neoclassical realist arguments that see 'under-balancing' strategies like appeasement as 'lowest common denominator' responses to political polarisation and gridlock or the availability of resources.[92] While the party system at Westminster was fragmented in the 1930s, the case should not be overstated: Chamberlain held a huge parliamentary majority throughout his premiership and could rely upon the obedience of the vast majority of Tory backbenchers right up until the Norwegian Debate of November 1940. The 'elite dissensus' model fails to explain why Chamberlain clung to appeasement even after public and elite opinion solidified against appeasement of the Nazi regime following the invasion of Czechoslovakia in March 1939.[93]

What would it have taken for Chamberlain to abandon appeasement in favour of a more active balancing strategy? We have argued that leaders are most likely to pursue appeasement when the demands for increased security conflict sharply with what they are trying to achieve domestically. In Chamberlain's case, a higher-cost strategy such as internal balancing would only have been possible if domestic constraints had eased. In the event, they did not, and with geopolitical pressure remaining constant (indeed, worsening) over the period, appeasement remained the strategy of choice.

Yet while we cannot rerun history to answer these questions about Chamberlain, the evolution of Franklin Delano Roosevelt's strategy towards Nazi Germany provides a useful case in point for considering the counterfactual argument.[94] To be sure, Germany's threat to the United States was more to do with trade and economics than military concerns.[95] Nevertheless, strategists in the US did fear that technological advances (especially in air warfare) would make the western hemisphere vulnerable to a Germany hegemonic in Europe, and even harboured suspicions of German designs on South America. Like Chamberlain, Roosevelt initially favoured diplomatic efforts to conciliate Hitler. Between 1936 and 1938, appeasement ran 'like

[92] This argument is put forward in Schweller, *Unanswered Threats*, pp. 47–56, 69–75. To summarise, Schweller argues that elite dissensus, social fragmentation, and regime weakness cause under-balancing, which, for present purposes, can be considered roughly synonymous with appeasement.

[93] Schweller's case study of Britain in the 1930s ends in March 1939, when German forces invaded, occupied, and dismembered Czechoslovakia. However, these events constitute a watershed moment after which it was not possible for Britain's political class to 'downgrade threat perception' as Schweller's model would have it. The threat posed by Germany was manifest and well understood. Indeed, Chamberlain's initial 'muted' response to the invasion invited such a backlash that he was forced to adopt a tougher line on Germany and abandon the language of appeasement in public. Our model accounts for why appeasement persisted in form, even if not in rhetoric, for six months after the invasion of Czechoslovakia. See Schweller, *Unanswered Threats*, p. 75; Hucker, *Public Opinion*, pp. 126–8, 131–4; and Parkinson, *Peace for Our Time*, p. 116.

[94] The US case is particularly appropriate for our purposes because the American and British political systems place comparable electoral demands on their leaders. In democracies like the Britain and US, leaders must respond to geopolitical pressures while *simultaneously* competing to secure the political backing of not only partisans but also a decisive slice of the national electorate. As industrial democracies with strongly competitive multiparty system, elected leaders are sensitive to the distributional consequences of foreign policy and to the tradeoffs between investing in military power (guns) and domestic consumption (butter). We are not the first to highlight the significance of such comparisons between the US and Britain for International Relations theory. See, for example, Waltz, *Foreign Policy and Democratic Politics: The American and British Experience* (Boston: Little Brown, 1967); and Narizny, *Political Economy*.

[95] This section draws heavily on Trubowitz, *Politics and Strategy*, pp. 64–74; see also Patrick Hearden, *Roosevelt Confronts Hitler: America's Entry into World War II* (DeKalb: Northern Illinois University Press, 1987); and Lloyd C. Gardner, *Economic Aspects of New Deal Diplomacy* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1964).

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a *leitmotif*' though US grand strategy.[96] This was clearest in Roosevelt's consideration of a peace initiative known as the Welles Plan, but it was also evident in a series of back-channel diplomatic missions that sought to address long-standing Germany grievances, split the emerging Berlin-Rome-Tokyo axis, and generally reduce the risk of war. By 1939, however, FDR had abandoned appeasement in favour of an 'offshore balancing' strategy.[97] Roosevelt took steps, sometimes in secret, to shore up Britain's defense and ratchet up pressure on Germany. The United States quickly became the 'arsenal of democracy' and Britain became America's first line of defense.

Why did Roosevelt opt for balancing when Chamberlain did not? Realist explanations cannot account for the difference. After all, the geopolitical threat posed by Germany was less immediate for the US than it was for Britain; if threat were the decisive factor, Chamberlain would have reversed course before Roosevelt. FDR even moved away from appeasement as the level of external threat intensified (that is, after the Czech Crisis) rather than embracing appeasement as the strategic triage model would predict. Strictly *Innenpolitik* explanations also cannot account for the difference. While some Democratic constituencies (for example, southern planters; Wall Street bankers) favoured a more vigorous response to Nazi Germany, Democratic interests (for example, organised labour; Western progressives) that were closely aligned with Roosevelt's New Deal reformist agenda opposed intervention in the European crisis. Like Chamberlain, Roosevelt had to contend with popular antiwar sentiment. Mass revulsion to the horrors of World War I may not have been as prevalent in the US as in Europe, but public opinion in the US was generally opposed to involvement in European affairs during the 1930s.

In Roosevelt's case, what tipped the scales toward balancing was a shift in the Democratic Party's preferences in the guns versus butter tradeoff (see Table 5). As our model would predict, the triggering event was domestic, not international, in origin. In 1937 and 1938, the US experienced one of the steepest economic descents in its history.[98] The so-called 'Roosevelt Recession' was so severe that many – although not all – Democrats, including organised labour, came to see increased military spending as an attractive way to prime the pump and sustain voters' confidence in the party. If domestic policies had failed to promote economic growth, perhaps a more vigorous – and expensive – foreign policy could step into the breach. Reflecting this domestic political shift, Roosevelt's efforts to support Britain, expand the navy, and strengthen the army received overall Democratic backing from 1939 onward.

When the New Deal failed to bring economic prosperity, appeasement for Roosevelt became counterproductive and expendable. To be sure, the easing of the guns-versus-butter trade-off in the US did not make Roosevelt any less subject to the forces of external events than his British counterpart. But it did make it easier for Roosevelt to use those international events to move Democratic lawmakers his way, albeit in the guise of issuing 'loans' to Britain, not outright war-making assistance. In contrast

[96] Frederick W. Marks III, 'Six between Roosevelt and Hitler: America's Role in the Appeasement of Nazi Germany', *Historical Journal*, 28:4 (1985), pp. 969–82, 982.

[97] Mearsheimer, *Tragedy of Great Power Politics*, pp. 237, 252–7. See also Arthur A. Stein, 'Domestic Constraints, Extended Deterrence, and the Incoherence of Grand Strategy: The United States, 1938–1950', in Rosecrance and Stein (eds), *The Domestic Bases of Grand Strategy*, pp. 96–123.

[98] Charles P. Kindleberger, *The World in Depression, 1929–1939* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1973), p. 272.

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		Party Preferences: Guns over Butter				
Leader/Period	Geopolitical slack	Distributive benefits	Electoral advantage	Fiscal constraints	Predicted strategy type	Grand strategy
Roosevelt, 1936–8	No	Weak	No	Tight	Satisficing	Appeasement to buckpassing
Roosevelt, 1939–	No	Yes	Yes	Loose	Balancing	Buckpassing to balancing
Chamberlain, 1937–9	No	No	No	Tight	Satisficing	Appeasement

Table 5. *FDR's changing political calculus*

to the situation prevailing in the earlier years of his presidency, in 1939 Roosevelt found himself at the head of a party with preferences for guns. Had Chamberlain's Conservative Party come to see domestic advantage in investing in guns, our theory predicts that he too would have moved toward a more active balancing strategy to deal with Germany.

Appeasement reconsidered

Few scholars still hold to the belief that Chamberlain's efforts to appease Nazi Germany were shaped by *naiveté* or negligence. Chamberlain's actions are now understood as hardheaded (rational) political calculations. Realists have allowed that appeasement was an understandable if imperfect strategy to cope with unforgiving international circumstances, while for *Innenpolitik* scholars Chamberlain's policies were in response to powerful economic interests or other perceived domestic political exigencies. In this article, we have argued that each of these approaches contributes valuable insight to understanding appeasement, but that each also incurs significant limitations by modelling a causal process in which explanatory variables emanate from just one level of analysis, whether international or domestic. Appeasement is not a singular response to multiple international threats; nor is it wholly attributable to domestic factors. Instead, appeasement is best understood as a strategy that cross-pressured leaders use to reconcile geopolitical and domestic imperatives.

Chamberlain was severely cross-pressured. He was under no illusion that Hitler's intentions were peaceful or of limited political scope, yet at the same time Chamberlain was not well positioned domestically to actively balance against Germany. Advocating active balancing before 1940 would likely have come at great personal political cost and also been unsuccessful. The resource constraints and partisan incentives facing Chamberlain also help to explain why appeasement cannot be explained as an attempt to 'buy time' for balancing; domestic circumstances made an expensive balancing strategy unattainable in the long-term just as much as in the near-term. Instead, Chamberlain saw great advantages in relying on diplomacy to cope with the Nazi threat. Unlike his counterpart Franklin Roosevelt, whose domestic constraints ultimately proved less static, Chamberlain found it difficult to drop appeasement in favour of more expensive defensive strategies as conditions in *Mitteleuropa* worsened.

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Britain's policies of the 1930s were not produced by unique historical circumstances or the idiosyncrasies of one individual. Rather, they may be explained by deductively applying a model of grand strategy choice that emphasises how international and domestic pressures produce the grand strategy outcomes. Our approach thus underscores the value of individual level-of-analysis. That is, by centering the analysis on strategic choices (both political and geopolitical) and tradeoffs faced by the political leader, it is possible to generate a coherent and parsimonious explanation for what has hitherto been regarded as a perplexing anomaly: the decision to appease a rising challenger.

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