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The issue of whether, in the UN era, the right of self-defence can be exercised not only against an armed attack that has in fact occurred but also against the threat of such an attack has long been a notable point of disagreement amongst both scholars and states. Deep divisions in the literature concerning the possible lawfulness of any form of ‘anticipatory’ defensive force emerged almost immediately following inception of the UN system, and – as Kinga Tibori Szabó rightly states in the introduction to her excellent book on the subject – the lawfulness of anticipatory action remains ‘one of the most controversial questions in contemporary international law’ (p. 2).

There are two related research questions at the heart of *Anticipatory Action in Self-Defence*, which the author clearly identifies from the outset (p. 9). The first of these essentially asks whether anticipatory action in self-defence is lawful today. The second question is conditional upon an affirmative answer to the first: what are the legal limits of pre-emptive defensive uses of force? At the risk of significantly downplaying the quality and depth of this book, it is possible to boil its answers to these questions down to a relatively simple form. First, Tibori Szabó argues that anticipatory action in self-defence is – or, rather, *can be* – lawful. However, she then concludes that pre-emptive self-defence is *only* lawful if it complies with the well-established customary criteria of necessity (meaning, in this context, that any response is conditional on the imminent occurrence of an ‘armed attack’) and proportionality (meaning, here, that only what the author calls ‘moderate’ force is used to stop that attack from taking place).
It must be said that, in themselves, neither of these principal questions nor the ultimate answers given to them appear especially novel. While any measure in self-defence taken against a threat of force remains controversial, it is evident that an increasing number of writers now accept that anticipatory self-defence can be lawful, with its lawfulness usually being seen as dependent on the action meeting restrictive customary requirements: particularly a crucial criterion of imminence. There are plenty of scholars who have already made the same core claim as that advanced in *Anticipatory Action in Self-Defence*. At first glance, then, one might reasonably question what new contribution this book makes to the existing scholarship.

In fact, there are many reasons why Tibori Szabó’s work represents an extremely valuable addition to the debate. The first of these is simply the scope of the book under review. While many writers have engaged with the issue of anticipatory action in self-defence in an article format, or as one aspect of a wider monograph, few have tackled the issue on this kind of scale. In particular, the quality and sheer depth of the research throughout is a key strength here. The author’s analysis is continually strong, but it is the foundational research underpinning it that is perhaps more notable.

One result of this sort of larger, monograph-length assessment of the issues related to anticipatory action in self-defence is that the author is able to interrogate her subject-matter from a number of perspectives. For example, the first part of the book takes its time in providing a legal-historical analysis of the temporal dimension of self-defence, with the author exploring pre-Charter theory and practice in some depth to identify the roots of the right (pp. 29-124). Most treatments of pre-emptive self-defence simply do not have the space for such meticulous historical contextualisation. This opening section of the book admittedly covers some well-trodden ground, such as an analysis of the implications of the 1837 *Caroline* incident (although it should be noted that Tibori Szabó dissects this incident rather better than most, at pp. 72-75). However, it also engages with state practice and other historical material that is commonly overlooked in the context of the right of self-defence, such as the implications of *Operation Catapult* in 1940 (pp. 96-98) – especially regarding the necessity criterion – or the important eighteenth century distinction between ‘perfect’ and ‘imperfect’ wars in academic theory (pp. 59-68). Overall, this legal-historical aspect of the book significantly enriches the subsequent analysis.

Interpretative scrutiny of Article 51, and particularly the exact meaning of the phrase ‘if an armed attack occurs’, forms a key part of the longstanding anticipatory self-defence debate. Tibori Szabó takes a purposive approach to interpreting Article 51, and her analysis of the provision provides a solid basis for the claim that it does not preclude anticipatory action per se. This is a view to which this reviewer does not necessarily subscribe, but it is regardless very credibly argued. There is, admittedly, a logical flaw in the author’s specific reasoning concerning Judge Schwebel’s famous claim in the *Nicaragua* case that the term ‘if an armed attack occurs’ is not the same as saying ‘if, and only if, an armed attack occurs’ (p. 109, at fn 35). However, in general the assessment of Article 51 – based on the object and purpose of the UN Charter as a whole and its *travaux préparatoires* – is excellent (pp. 109-114).