

“Given reasonable prospects for successful deterrence and the variety of other policy tools that can be used . . . preemption generally does not appear to be the best choice in dealing with WMD threats.”

Deterrence or Preemption?

JEFFREY W. KNOPF

Since the terrorist attacks of September 11, 2001, many observers have concluded that the central strategies of the cold war—containment and deterrence—are no longer relevant. In the face of suicide terrorism, some question whether there is any threatened response that can deter adversaries willing to give up their lives to carry out an attack.

In addition to this skepticism about deterring terrorists, even before 9-11, many also expressed doubts about deterring so-called rogue states like Iraq under Saddam Hussein and North Korea. Concerns about these states revolve around whether they can be deterred from using weapons of mass destruction (WMD) or sharing them with terrorists.

Reflecting increased doubts about deterrence, after 9-11 President George W. Bush's administration gave greater emphasis to the option of preemption. Preemption is a strategy of striking first, before the other side can launch an anticipated attack. In contrast, a classic strategy of deterrence tries to prevent attacks by threatening to respond in a way that would cause the other side to end up worse off, thereby convincing it not to launch an attack in the first place.

Two caveats are in order. First, what the Bush administration calls preemption is closer to what has historically been considered preventive war. As traditionally understood, preemption involves acting when one has warning that an attack is imminent; preventive war involves trying to prevent an anticipated future danger. President Bush and his supporters argue, however, that the United States may never discover when an attack is imminent, so that acting against potential threats before they are fully formed should still be considered a form of preemption.

Second, the Bush administration never officially abandoned deterrence as an element of US strategy. A number of policy documents, including the 2002 National Security Strategy crafted after 9-11, explicitly list deterrence as one of the goals of US defense strategy. In addition, the administration has shown an interest in deterrence in a more general sense. President Bush and his aides have attached great importance to improving the US reputation for strength and resolve. This reflects a belief that projecting an image of toughness will help deter challenges to the United States—that is, that deterrence is still a goal and still achievable.

At the same time, the Bush administration has made clear that in certain situations it will not count on deterrence. The Iraq War is the prime example. Based on fears that Hussein had WMD and ties to terrorists, the administration's case for war rested on the argument that deterrence and containment would not necessarily work against his regime. Therefore, it would be better to deal with the threat before Iraq could launch or abet some future attack.

Today, similar debates center on Iran, which appears to be working to develop nuclear arms, and on North Korea, which has taken its nuclear weapon program to the testing stage. This makes it timely to assess the relative merits of preemption and deterrence for dealing with threats posed by rogue states. In general deterrence, even though it cannot be made perfect, remains a robust strategy and in many cases will be superior to preemption.

CROSS PURPOSES

Are deterrence and preemption mutually exclusive, or can they work together? The Bush administration and its supporters believe the preemption doctrine can strengthen deterrence: the threat to hit other states preemptively will convince some states not to seek WMD or give support to terrorists. In this view, even a decision to exercise the

JEFFREY W. KNOPF is a lecturer in national security affairs at the Naval Postgraduate School. The views expressed here are those of the author.

preemption option can contribute to deterrence. For example, US Defense Secretary Donald Rumsfeld argued in 2005 that the military capability the United States had demonstrated in Afghanistan and Iraq “has to have a deterrent effect on people.”

There are two problems with this analysis, however. First, specific situations still largely require an either/or choice. Either a state tries to deter, meaning it does not launch a preemptive attack, at least not for the time being, or it chooses to preempt, meaning it no longer relies on deterrence. Even if a state believes preemption will have deterrent effects on third parties, in dealing with specific cases only one of these can be the primary strategy at a given moment.

Second, preemption does not necessarily make it more likely that third parties will be deterred. It could easily have just the opposite effect. This is especially true for the Bush doctrine of preemption because of its close association with other aspects of administration strategy. President Bush famously listed three states as comprising an “axis of evil”—Iraq, Iran, and North Korea—and has often suggested “regime change” as the preferred policy goal with respect to such states. But the combination of describing regime change as a goal and threatening preemptive military action tends to undermine deterrence. By giving certain countries reason to fear that they may be objects of US military action as long as their governments remain autocratic or unfriendly, this strategy removes any incentive for those governments to exercise restraint. If a country believes the consequences of not attacking will be as bad as or even worse than those of attacking, it will not be deterred.

Thomas Schelling pointed out 40 years ago that any deterrent threat must be paired with an assurance: “To say, ‘One more step and I shoot,’ can be a deterrent threat only if accompanied by the implicit assurance, ‘And if you stop I won’t.’” Deterrence can fail, this means, when such assurance is not given or is not believed, even when the deterrent threat itself is credible. The current emphasis on preemption, when paired with a goal of regime change, weakens the credibility of US assurances. Rogue states have reason to believe they may be attacked or invaded even if they do not attack the United States or transfer WMD to terrorists.

For states that have not yet built nuclear weapons, the US posture actually increases their incentives to acquire nuclear arms, because they may believe having their own is the only way to deter the United States. With respect to Iran, the US pos-

ture may also be encouraging it to deepen its ties with terrorists and insurgents as another way of being able to threaten retaliation against any US preemptive strike.

For a country that does possess WMD, if this state comes to believe that US preemption or invasion is imminent, this gives it an incentive to launch its weapons while it can, for whatever benefits this might provide, before those weapons are destroyed in a US first strike. The policies of preemption and regime change, therefore, do not automatically serve to reinforce deterrence and in some circumstances are more likely to weaken deterrence.

This does not necessarily mean that preemption is the wrong choice, only that the United States cannot have it all. The more it emphasizes preemption, the more likely it is to weaken deterrence against certain other actors. The more the United States wants to use deterrence, the more it will have to soft pedal the option of preemption and pull back from the goal of regime change.

WORST NIGHTMARES

Because preemption and deterrence are to some degree mutually exclusive, it is important to figure out which is likely to be the better alternative. In practice, people have tended to take sides in policy debates over these options based on avoiding the scenario they fear most. Thus, before the Iraq War, opponents were driven by concerns about the possible costs and implications of starting a preemptive war.

Supporters of the war thought the opposite way. Their support was based not so much on arguments *for* preemption as on arguments *against* deterrence. Because they anticipated that deterrence might fail—resulting, in the worst case, in the US homeland being attacked again—they concluded that preemption was necessary. This dynamic can be described as a nightmare-avoidance model of choice. People favor a choice less on its intrinsic merits than on the hope it will help avoid their worst nightmare.

A comment that Vice President Dick Cheney made provides a good illustration. According to journalist Ron Suskind, in November 2001, Cheney responded to an intelligence report on a possible way terrorists might obtain WMD by saying that if there were even a 1 percent chance such a report were true, the United States should treat it as if the intelligence were certain and respond accordingly. This perspective suggests that a terrorist attack using WMD is the worst thing that could

happen—the greatest nightmare—and therefore the United States must act even if the odds of such an attack are quite small. As plausible as it sounds, this way of thinking is false. Sometimes, preemption is the worse option.

The underlying problem is that the nightmare-avoidance approach to making choices is not the best approach. Ideally, policy analysis seeks to identify the alternative options for addressing a problem, evaluates the pros and cons of each option, and compares the options to identify the one that promises the relatively best outcome.

A risk that deterrence might fail, therefore, does not automatically make the case for preemption. First, there might be other options. In addition to preemption and deterrence, one might apply sanctions, use diplomacy, or offer positive incentives if the other side gives up WMD. Second, even if other alternatives are deemed infeasible, rational policy analysis requires a full assessment of both deterrence and preemption: that is, the probability of either option's success or failure, and the costs and potential side effects of each option. By themselves, the limitations of one option do not prove the other option should be chosen—it could have even greater limitations.

RISK OF FAILURE

Although there can be multiple reasons for contemplating military action against a rogue state, support for preemption has often derived mainly from the perceived weaknesses of a deterrence strategy. How strong is the case against deterrence?

The foundation of the argument against deterrence is a simple observation: deterrence can fail. While this is true, it is still important to estimate as best as possible the actual likelihood that deterrence will fail and the likely consequences if it does. Some deterrence critics claim the risks are greater now because today's threats are different from the cold war. They argue that, compared with the leaders who ruled the Soviet Union, dictators like Iraq's Hussein or North Korea's Kim Jong Il are even less subject to domestic checks and balances and more likely to make irrational decisions. They also contend that differences in culture mean some adversaries have values so different from Americans' that they will not respond to deterrent threats in the way the United States expects.

Although deterrence success cannot be guaranteed, there is little basis for concluding that deterrence failure is likely when dealing with rogue states. Most dictators value their own lives, want to stay in power, and want to have a state to rule over. They will not generally take actions they think have a high probability of leading to their death or the destruction of their country. It does not take much awareness of the world to understand that attacking the United States with nuclear weapons is likely to lead to such a result.

Some critics worry there are situations in which the United States would be reluctant to respond with nuclear weapons. For these cases, there are conventional options. If the United States held the option of regime change in reserve as a deterrent threat, rather than pursuing it preemptively, this would provide an additional source of deterrence that does not rely

on the threat of nuclear retaliation.

Even leaders whose extreme religious or ideological beliefs might make them willing to risk national suicide still care about the success of

their cause. They might risk the lives of their people to achieve some exalted goal of their extremist beliefs, but they will not do this if their cause will be destroyed in the process. If such leaders think that they, their followers, and their base of operations will be eliminated before they have achieved their final objectives, they can be deterred from precipitate action.

In addition, where responsibility is shared, a single fanatical leader cannot necessarily initiate an attack. Other members of the leadership might overrule him. If the military has physical control of the weapons, military officers might refuse to carry out an order that they believe would result in the destruction of their country.

THE HISTORICAL RECORD

Although it is hard to estimate the probabilities precisely, historical evidence suggests that deterrence has a good chance of working. There are many past cases, from well before 9-11, in which hard-liners argued for preemption, yet none of these ended with a failure to deter the use of WMD.

Early in the cold war, some advocated preventive war against the Soviet Union before it acquired the ability to strike the United States with nuclear weapons. Indeed, many of those who now describe the

When it comes to deterrence, WMD-armed states are likely to be more similar to the Soviet Union than to suicide terrorists.

temporarily delay a program, but they are unlikely to succeed in preventing nuclear proliferation.

If air strikes are not sufficient, the other preemptive option is an invasion to bring about regime change. The two most likely targets, Iran and North Korea, have greater retaliatory capabilities and larger populations than did either Afghanistan or Iraq. Hence, an invasion of either would carry a greater risk of counterstrikes and have a much more difficult time succeeding than did the first two campaigns of the war on terror in Afghanistan and Iraq.

Moreover, the examples of Afghanistan and Iraq are not encouraging. Five years after the war in Afghanistan began, the Taliban have been staging a comeback, while in Iraq the situation has teetered on the brink of disaster for some time. From today's vantage point, one cannot state with certainty that either case will be considered a success in the future. In short, there is no guarantee that preemption will succeed, and there are good reasons to believe it has a high probability of at least partial failure.

And preemption has clear costs and risks. It is now obvious that any invasion to promote regime change will produce US casualties, have a large price tag, and cause civilian deaths and destroy infrastructure in the target country as part of the collateral damage of war. These costs could prove comparable to or even greater than the harm the United States would suffer from a failure to deter a WMD attack.

Finally, a number of undesirable second-order effects flow from preemption. Most seriously, another military effort against a Muslim country would play into Al Qaeda's propaganda that the United States is anti-Muslim and would help Islamists recruit new people to their cause. An unwise use of preemption could easily serve to increase terrorism rather than reduce it. Meanwhile, as noted earlier, simply by emphasizing the possibilities of preemption and forcible regime change, the United States tends to undermine deterrence by giving other countries greater incentives to acquire their own nuclear deterrent or to attack first before they suffer a preemptive strike.

UNCOMFORTABLE BUT PRUDENT

Those who can imagine enemies of the United States who are not deterred and who strike the American homeland, this time with WMD, gen-

erally favor acting preemptively. Those who can imagine a costly war that becomes a quagmire while generating increased anti-Americanism generally oppose preemption and place their hopes in deterrence. Although it is easy to understand, the nightmare-avoidance mode of choice may not produce the best policy decisions. And the fear that deterrence might fail does not by itself prove preemption is better.

In fact, deterrence has a good chance of preventing a rogue state from attacking with WMD or providing WMD to terrorists. The actual probability that deterrence will fail is not large. And the consequences of deterrence failure, though serious, are not as great as was the case during the cold war.

Preemption can also fail, and even when it is successful it can have high costs and negative side effects. Because preemption has significant limitations of its own, the United States might find it more prudent—albeit uncomfortable—to emphasize deterrence and accept a certain residual risk of deterrence failure. The final decision is partly

subjective: people may decide that taking a risk of the homeland being hit with WMD is simply more unpalatable than accepting the risks of preemption. Even where there is almost

no risk of a WMD strike on the United States, there might be other goals, such as protecting allies in the region or stopping human rights abuses, that must be considered in contemplating a military option. The choice should be based on an informed judgment, however, and not driven by fear.

It is important, too, to remember that deterrence and preemption are not the only options available in dealing with nuclear proliferation. A number of other policies can help address the threats of terrorism and WMD proliferation. These include homeland security measures, intelligence, police work, diplomacy, various economic and financial tools, and efforts to persuade people that terrorism and WMD use are morally wrong and contrary to the teachings of all religions.

Preemption should not be ruled out entirely. But, given reasonable prospects for successful deterrence and the variety of other policy tools that can be used—along with the demonstrated costs and risks of preemptive war—preemption generally does not appear to be the best choice in dealing with WMD threats. ■

For states that have not yet built nuclear weapons, the US posture actually increases their incentives to acquire nuclear weapons.
