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Russell, James A.; Wirtz, James J.

Monterey, California. Naval Postgraduate School

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Strategic Insight

Nuclear Weapons, War with Iraq, and U.S. Security Strategy in the Middle East

by [James A. Russell](#) and [James J. Wirtz](#)

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On the eve of Operation Desert Storm in January 1991, then-Secretary of State James Baker traveled to Geneva to meet with Iraqi Foreign Secretary Tariq Aziz to convey to the Iraqis that any use of weapons of mass destruction (WMD) against coalition forces would be met with an overwhelming response. It was widely assumed at the time that this meant that the United States would retaliate with nuclear weapons if Iraq used chemical or biological weapons against the coalition. Today, analysts still debate whether Iraq was incapable of using its chemical or biological weapons arsenal, never intended to use it, or was deterred by the possibility of U.S. nuclear retaliation. This debate will not end soon, as it is unlikely that Iraq's leaders will explain their reasons for not using their arsenal.

Talk of overwhelming retaliation at the Baker-Aziz meeting represented just one chapter in American thinking about the role of nuclear weapons in defending U.S. interests in the Persian Gulf and Middle East. The most famous U.S. policy toward the region was announced in January 1980, when President Jimmy Carter stated that the United States would use "...any means necessary..." to prevent a hostile power, i.e., the Soviet Union, from gaining control over the Persian Gulf. While the so-called Carter Doctrine did not specifically mention nuclear weapons, it was widely believed at the time that the threat to use nuclear weapons was part of the U.S. strategy to deter the Soviets from advancing south from Afghanistan towards the oil-rich Persian Gulf.



B-52H bomber with advanced nuclear-tipped cruise missiles

Today, U.S. officials again face the thorny issue of determining the role that nuclear weapons should play in protecting U.S. interests in the region. While the possibility of a military campaign against Iraq highlights this issue, the [Nuclear Posture Review](#) (NPR) in a matter of fact way identifies the Persian Gulf and Middle East as a focus of emerging U.S. nuclear strategy. Released by the Bush administration in January 2002, the NPR calls for the military planners to integrate conventional and nuclear forces into a single "strategic" deterrent. If necessary, this new strategic triad could be used to disarm and attack hostile states and non-state actors that are developing weapons of mass destruction. And, as senior officials have noted, preventive or preemptive attacks are the only way to make this type of forceful disarmament policy work. The prospect of fighting preventive wars to eliminate clandestine chemical, biological and nuclear arsenals is being considered as an overarching strategic option, while the Bush administration considers a specific target on the threat horizon, Iraq.

Preventive War vs. Preemption

Although the terms often are used interchangeably, "preventive war" and "preemption" are different strategic concepts. Preventive war is based on the concept that war is inevitable and that it is better to fight now while the costs are low rather than later when the costs are high. It is a deliberate decision to begin a war. Preventive war thinking seems to dominate U.S. planning about Iraq: it is better to destroy Saddam Hussein's regime now than to deal later with a regime armed with nuclear weapons. Preventive war thinking, however, can turn out to be a self-fulfilling prophecy (treating war as inevitable helps make it inevitable). It also can lead to unnecessary conflict because few things are inevitable: Saddam could die of natural causes next week, producing a significant opportunity for the United States and its allies to shape Iraqi politics and policies.

Preemption is nothing more than a quick draw. Upon detecting evidence that an opponent is about to attack, one beats the opponent to the punch and attacks first to blunt the impending strike. Preemption or launch-under-attack are strategies that can be adopted by states that fear preventive war.

What About Iraq?

The prospect of a U.S. attack on Iraq raises questions about the role that nuclear weapons will play in the military operation, if any. The need to deter Iraqi use of chemical, biological or even nuclear weapons is as important today as was in 1990. Faced with a U.S. invasion, Iraq might choose to use WMD in a number of ways: (1) they might be used directly against U.S. forces that are invading Iraq; (2) they might be used to attack U.S. forces in the region in response to a U.S. conventional counterforce strike against Iraqi WMD targets; (3) they might be used in a pre-emptive strike against U.S. forces or against the countries hosting these forces during the buildup to invasion; and, (4) they might be used in an attack against Israel, which could prompt a proportionate Israeli response. While the United States would hope to deter an Iraqi WMD attack in any of these scenarios, a military campaign to remove Saddam may make the deterrent threat of U.S. nuclear weapons mute. Many believe that Saddam views his WMD as a "strategic" asset that is vital to his personal survival. With his regime threatened by a U.S. invasion, Saddam could conceivably use his toxic arsenal as a weapon of last resort. Unlike Desert Storm, U.S. forces would be returning to Iraq not to force a return to the status quo, but to create some fundamental changes in Iraqi politics.



Saddam in a recent televised speech in which he vowed that Iraq would repel any invasion and severely punish the attackers

The United States has long maintained a degree of "strategic ambiguity" about using nuclear weapons in the case of chemical or biological attack against its forces. A less ambiguous threat of nuclear retaliation would undercut the so-called "negative security assurances" given by U.S. officials as part of the nuclear non-proliferation regime. During an invasion of Iraq, however, U.S. officials might be faced with the unpalatable prospect of nuclear escalation in response to Saddam's actions. Or, in the case of an Israeli nuclear response, the United States would be presented with nuclear escalation by a third party. The prospect of nuclear weapons use in a battlefield setting or in a preemptive strike against hardened underground targets is not all that difficult to imagine. Press reports are now surfacing that Iraq has developed extensive underground facilities to house its WMD storage and production sites.^[1] These are sites that would need to be targeted in any military campaign, especially if chemical or biological weapons are being used against population centers. Nuclear weapons may be the only way to ensure the prompt destruction of an opponent's WMD arsenal and infrastructure.

What About the Region?

The Nuclear Posture Review suggests that it is likely that nuclear, chemical, biological or radiological weapons will be employed either in or from the Middle East in the future. Nuclear planners no longer worry much about a threat from Moscow and instead worry about what is transpiring in Baghdad, Damascus, Tripoli and Tehran. The Nuclear Posture review identifies Iraq, Iran, Syria and Libya as countries that could be involved in immediate, potential or unexpected contingencies requiring the United States to use nuclear weapons. One of the three "immediate" contingencies in the NPR in which the United States could use nuclear weapons is in fact an Iraqi attack on Israel.

Changing U.S. nuclear strategy reflected in the NPR and the new strategic framework with Moscow is a response to the evolving threat environment produced by the spread of nuclear, chemical and biological weapons and long-range delivery systems during the 1990s. WMD programs in Libya, Syria, Iraq and Iran are directly responsible for these countries being made priority "strategic" targets. Precision-guided conventional counterforce targeting with the new generation of munitions remains the preferred method of countering WMD. But the concern about the underground Libyan complex at Tarhuna voiced in 1996 by then-Defense Secretary Perry proved a harbinger of things to come. The NPR identifies a need to now target up to 1400 hardened underground facilities around the world that are associated with WMD production or storage. Conventional munitions cannot destroy the sites, and the NPR calls for the development of a nuclear earth penetrating munitions to hold these targets at risk. Officials are now openly commenting on the difficulty of targeting Iraq's underground WMD facilities. If Iraq has moved these sites underground, other countries in the region probably have followed suit.



Technicians maintaining a B-61 gravity bomb. This nuclear munition has been identified as one that could be modified to hit hardened underground targets.

Another targeting priority of the NPR is "relocatable targets" i.e., mobile long-range missiles. All of the Middle Eastern countries identified in the NPR have active missile, chemical and biological weapons programs (courtesy of Russian, Chinese or North Korean benefactors). The situation in Iran is particularly ominous, with development of the "indigenous" medium-range Shahab 3 (and a rumored longer-range Shahab 4 or 5) missile and efforts to create a fissile material production capability as part of the nuclear reactor under construction at Bushehr. While it remains unclear what role, if any, U.S. nuclear weapons have in countering these "relocatable" targets, missiles "on the move" are seen as major threat by U.S. planners.

Conclusions

The reorientation of U.S. strategic deterrence away from Russia and towards proliferators and rogue regimes has focused U.S. policy and planning on the Middle East. In the short term, it could force the Bush administration to come to terms with the full implications of preventive war strategies. Over the long term, it will raise questions about the relevance of nuclear deterrence as a basis for strategic relations in the region. The Nuclear Posture Review steers the United States into uncharted waters in the region. Strategic thinking, not unlike the work that was undertaken during the first decades of the Cold War, is needed to flesh out U.S. strategy.

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References

1. See Eric Schmitt and James Dao, "Air Power Alone Can't Defeat Iraq, Rumsfeld Asserts," *New York Times*, July 31, 2002, p.1.