

Publications

Can Preventive War Cure Proliferation?

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The Iraq war was the first application of the new theory that preventive war can be an effective instrument against the spread of nuclear, biological, and chemical weapons. "Prevention" invites a medical metaphor. And, indeed, observers often imagine an epidemic when they think of weapons of mass destruction proliferation. Yet the best metaphor for proliferation is a cancer that results from environmental causes and metastasizes in predictable patterns from cell to neighboring cell. China gets nuclear weapons, India responds to China, and then Pakistan to India. Israel builds nuclear weapons, then Iraq tries, along with Iran, even as the acquisition of chemical and biological weapons by other states adds to the region-wide malignancy. North Korea's nuclear weapons program prompts worries of proliferation to Japan and South Korea, and so on.

For the Bush administration, the danger from this disease in Iraq was too great to risk further delay. Days before the war began, Vice President Richard Cheney said that Iraqi President Saddam Hussein "has, in fact, reconstituted nuclear weapons." U.S. officials warned that Iraq had imported key elements for new nuclear weapons, improved its facilities to produce thousands of chemical weapons, and expanded its biological weapons program to pre-1991 levels. President George W. Bush said that Iraq had hundreds of tons chemical weapons and thousands of liters of biological weapons that could kill millions and a hidden fleet of missiles and unmanned aerial vehicles to deliver them. Worse, Saddam's "long-standing, direct, and continuing ties to terrorists networks," the president said, meant that "trusting in the sanity and restraint of Saddam Hussein is not a strategy, and it is not an option."

The United States and the United Kingdom successfully excised Saddam's regime. Yet the ultimate effectiveness of this radical surgery will not be determined for some time.

As of this writing, U.S. teams have found scant evidence supporting the prewar diagnosis. [See chart] Possibly the weapons of mass destruction were destroyed before the war. Possibly some were sent abroad. Possibly they exist undiscovered in the vast quantities claimed by the U.S. and British intelligence services. If so, these arsenals would pose an urgent international security and proliferation threat. Whoever does know their location might hoard them for future use against U.S. forces or steal them out of the country for sale to the highest bidder.

Another possibility is that the weapons programs did not exist on the scale that the United States asserted before the war. Three weeks after the fall of Baghdad, National Security Advisor Condoleezza Rice spoke of "pieces hidden here and there," marking perhaps the beginning of efforts to lower expectations. Of course, discovering any banned weapons would be evidence of noncompliance with UN resolutions.

The majority of the American public, proud of the military victory over Saddam's evil regime, may not yet care that the Iraqi arsenal was not what the Bush administration had alleged. International opinion, however, is less forgiving. If the United States does not produce evidence of large, ongoing nuclear, chemical, and biological weapons programs in prewar Iraq, the publics and governments in many nations may feel that the United States acted in bad faith. In that case, states whose cooperation or endorsement the United States needs on future international security issues may be less inclined to accept U.S. threat assessments or go along with its recommended actions.

Increased Proliferation Threat

Moreover, to be an effective treatment for proliferation, preventive war must not only remove the direct threat, it must also dissuade would-be proliferators. The United States and other concerned states may

yet try to use the Iraq treatment as an object lesson to induce states such as North Korea and Iran to change their behavior. But the early signs are that these regimes have drawn an opposite conclusion. U.S. officials report that North Korea is accelerating its nuclear program, not abandoning it. Iran, too, has consciously raised the public profile of its ostensibly civilian nuclear program and insisted that it would acquire full nuclear fuel-cycle capability, thus enabling it to enrich uranium to weapon-grade levels and reprocess plutonium from reactor fuel. Like India's army chief of staff after the first Iraq war, officials in Pyongyang and Tehran may believe that if one day you find yourself opposed by the United States, you'd better have a nuclear weapon.

Some favor limited military strikes against North Korea's facilities for reprocessing fuel rods into plutonium or against the nuclear fuel plants now under construction in Iran. Yet even the most aggressive advocates of military surgery acknowledge real problems here. Every good strike depends on great intelligence. Intelligence officials caution that locations of key facilities in North Korea and Iran remain unknown. If you don't get the whole tumor, the cancer remains. There is minimal—perhaps no—international support for even limited strikes. South Korean President Roh Moo Hyun warns that a strike against North Korea's Yongbyon reactor would be unthinkable, calling it "very, very dangerous." Iran is too big and too politically dynamic for the United States to attack without creating widespread instability and jeopardizing the prospect for normalizing relations for decades.

Preventive war is therefore no miracle cure. It cannot begin to replace the range of treatments necessary to make those who acquire these weapons give them up, or to prevent states or terrorists from seeking these deadly arsenals in the first place. Any effort to stop proliferation must not only rely on the implementation and enforcement of effective legal and inspection regimes; it must offer states that seek weapons of mass destruction a set of constructive alternatives for redressing insecurities and achieving status and international recognition. Consider the case of Iraq and Iran. Even if democratic transformations sweep the Middle East, a new Iraq and a new Iran might still want nuclear weapons as long as Israel has them and as long as such weapons are seen as the currency of great powers. The Iranian nuclear program began under the shah, when the United States sold that nation its first reactor; that program will likely continue under future governments unless regional dynamics change fundamentally.

The end of Saddam's regime could be just such a fundamental shift. Iraq posed a serious threat to Iran, Israel, Kuwait, Saudi Arabia, and the international security system. The removal of that threat could spur important counterproliferation gains and lead to a safer regional security environment. After all, a truly effective antiproliferation strategy must also seek to bring a region back to health.

Some may feel this possibility is more hope than prognosis. Yet in past decades, Israel, Egypt, and other states in the region endorsed UN resolutions to make the Middle East into a zone free of weapons of mass destruction. Those resolutions remain in limbo, but U.S. Secretary of State Colin Powell reaffirmed this objective in May: "It has always been a United States goal that conditions could be created in this part of the world where no nation would have a need for any weapons of mass destruction." The necessary conditions do not yet exist; the question is whether relevant governments will now purposefully and energetically use Iraq's defeat as a basis for creating them.

What the United States and Britain Said Iraq Had...

Nuclear Program

- Has or soon could have nuclear weapons
- Sought to import uranium and equipment for centrifuges to enrich it
- Rebuilt facilities at sites that were previously part of its nuclear program

Biological Program

- Active cadre of Iraqi nuclear scientists
- Biological weapons program far larger than before 1991 war
- Materials to produce thousands of liters of anthrax, botulinum toxin, and other biological agents, enough to kill millions
- Large-scale, redundant, and concealed biological weapons agent production capability
- Expanded and improved facilities for weapons production
- Civilian plants that could be and may have been rapidly converted for weapons
- At least seven mobile weapons factories

Chemical Program

- Between 100 and 500 tons of chemical agents, enough to fill 16,000 rockets
- Rebuilt and expanded facilities capable of producing chemical weapons
- Civilian facilities embedded in weapons program
- 30,000 munitions capable of delivering chemical and biological agents
- Weapons ready for launch in 45 minutes

Missile Program

- Several dozen Scud-type missiles and launchers
- Programs that test stands to develop longer-range missiles
- A variety of unmanned aerial vehicles, linked to devices for delivering weapons of mass destruction