

The Future of Force and U.S. National Security Strategy

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Abstract

What are the likely trends in the use of force in world politics in the coming 15 years, and how will they relate to U.S. national security policy? Most places in which the United States enters combat will be ones that planners do not now anticipate, because when and where force is used will depend on local crises that the United States cannot control in advance, accumulated lessons from experience, and the particular administration in power in Washington at the time. Limited humanitarian interventions will be frequent, but more often undertaken by other countries than by American forces. Unconventional American counterterror operations will be frequent, since Al Qaeda is unlikely to be neutralized soon. Inter-state conventional wars will be rare, especially since the United States is much more constrained from attacking remaining "rogue" states because of the bad results of the invasion of Iraq and the more complicated political and diplomatic obstacles in regard to Iran and North Korea. Use of weapons of mass destruction poses the biggest uncertainty, since such weapons are spreading, and it is unclear that all countries will handle them in the same restrained way that the United States and Soviet Union did during the Cold War. International institutions and legal norms regarding the use of force will be increasingly prominent, but more in the policies and rhetoric of weak states than of major powers, which will continue to assert interpretations of laws and norms that conform to their preferred security policies. Other countries will react to the use of U.S. power in various ways—by cooperating, carping, cowering, or countering—depending on their particular situations.

Introduction

The normal challenges for defense analysis are to assess programs and devise forces and plans for the effective application of national military power.¹ This requires a great deal of technical expertise, analytical sensitivity to how the components of military organization and doctrine fit together, and seasoned judgment about how to make strategies and capabilities serve political objectives. Serious professionals in this field naturally spend most of their time focusing on these questions. Ultimately, however, how well any strategies or force structures perform depends on whether they prove to be appropriate for the uses of force that they are called on to serve, which are matters of high politics. How can defense planners anticipate when, where, and how their forces will actually be used by national political authorities? This essay analyses this question in relation to U.S. defense planning.

Attempting to predict the patterns in which force is used in international politics is risky at best and foolish at worst. Few predictions that are detailed rather than Delphic, turn out to be very accurate. Nevertheless, it is necessary to make the effort, because there is no other basis on which to develop guidance for long-term military strategy. As the sole superpower today, and probably for another decade or more to come, the United States has a particular need for a sense of strategic direction and of the constraints and opportunities likely to evolve in the next 20 years—a period in which current decisions on procurement of high technology weaponry and choices in budgetary priorities and diplomatic initiatives will play out together and channel major developments in foreign policy.

Figuring out the effects of U.S. global primacy on international conflict is both important and difficult in unprecedented ways. The world has little experience with unipolarity. Clearly the United States has more strategic freedom of action than other great powers in modern times, so it will be tempted to use its power for purposes it considers

1 Many of the points in this article originated in a shorter discussion paper for a conference sponsored by the U.S. National Intelligence Council. The opinions in this article are those of the author alone and do not represent the position of any government agency.

proper whenever that can be done at reasonable cost. At the same time, U.S. power is not limitless, and costs can become much greater than anticipated, as has been glaringly revealed by experience in Iraq since 2003. Choices will be made. What developments in the strategic context of U.S. policy will shape those choices?

The following discussion touches on (1) Probable occasions for the use of military force up to 2020; (2) the role of international institutions in affecting decisions to use force; (3) evolution of international norms on employment of force, and the effects of norms; (4) effects of technological change; (5) reactions of other countries to the use of American power.

The main arguments are that developments in the use of force that can be reasonably estimated will not be major changes from practices that have evolved in the past dozen years, but that developments that could mark big shifts are entirely possible. Most of the major changes of previous eras were low on the list of probabilities—if on the list at all—before they occurred.

When and Where Will the Use of Force Be Most Likely?

The natural tendency for anyone venturing a prediction is to assume that events will continue on the trajectory on which they have been moving. The best predictor of what will happen tomorrow is what is happening today. Yet most people realize that trajectories do not continue indefinitely. Trends may exhaust themselves or energize forces of opposition that eventually reverse them. A rising stock market eventually declines, and political trends can be sharply reversed by shocks to the system. The problem is that, even if the underlying conditions for change are identified, it is seldom possible to estimate exactly when and how change will occur.²

2 After the Iranian Revolution of the late 1970s, for example, many analysts warned of the danger that similar upheavals could occur in other unstable or troubled countries, where similar underlying conditions existed. See for example Abul Kasim Mansur (pseud.), “The Crisis in Iran: Why the U.S. Ignored a Quarter Century of Warning,” *Armed Forces Journal International*, Vol. 116, No. 5 (January 1979), pp. 26–28, and John Horton, “Mexico, the Way of Iran?”

Probabilities that the United States will use force in significant ways in the years up to 2020 depend on many things, among them:

- *Challenges and opportunities that will not be anticipated until shortly before they erupt.* The most likely uses of force are those that we do not now see as likely. They will arise from local instabilities or crises that the United States cannot control in advance.
- *Potential crises or opportunities that are currently recognized.* This does not contradict the previous point. The United States uses force quite often. Many occasions are surprises; others are ones that were seen coming.
- *Feedback from experience.* Successes at low cost will encourage more frequent resort to force, failures or pyrrhic victories will discourage it. Public support for military activism that is initially popular can decline dramatically over time if there is a steady stream of bad news for a prolonged period. This has been happening gradually with public opinion on the war in Iraq as it drags on inconclusively.
- *Who is in power in Washington.* Parties, politics, and personalities will determine which choices are made in all but the most compelling situations, when “most compelling” means cases in which the United States is attacked directly. Partisanship made no difference in the response to the terrorist attacks of September 11, 2001, but it is very relevant to the war in Iraq.

It is risky to predict the future on the basis of current trajectories of events, because developments deflect or reverse trajectories, but also because unimportant countries become important without much warning.³ In none of the past six decades would estimators have put high on their lists of predictions the crises or wars that broke out. Who would have predicted in 1943 that a decade later the United States would be ending a war against its Second World War ally, China in an obscure

International Journal of Intelligence and Counterintelligence, Vol. 1, No. 2 (1986). On problems in predicting on the basis of existing trends, see Richard K. Betts, “Warning Dilemmas: Normal Theory vs. Exceptional Theory,” *Orbis*, Vol. 26, No. 4 (Winter 1983).

3 See Charles Burton Marshall, “National Security: Thoughts on the Intangibles,” in James R. Schlesinger et al., *Defending America: Toward a New Role in the Post-Detente World* (New York: Basic Books, 1977), pp. 81–82.

country like Korea? or in 1953 that the closest brush with nuclear war would come over a crisis in Cuba? or in 1963, following the victory in the missile crisis, that within a decade the United States would be pulling back from military activism abroad? or in 1973 that within 10 years American forces would be fighting in Grenada and Beirut? or in 1983 that within a decade the United States would have fought a major war against Iraq and would be in combat in Somalia? or in 1993 that the next 10 years would see three American wars, and against countries like Serbia, Afghanistan, and Iraq again?

Nevertheless, some occasions of conflict are anticipated, or they develop gradually in a way that makes adaptation and planning possible to an extent not possible in regard to a surprise attack that initiates war. Estimates should consider both what developments could plausibly flow from the current trajectory of events (points that are noted in italics below), and what changes in international or domestic conditions could make the main strategic engagements of the United States completely novel. Whatever the United States does in reaction to any of these expectations, of course, may change the predictions.

Limited humanitarian interventions in small countries that pose few risks of long-term entanglement will be frequent, but more often undertaken by European countries or United Nations-mandated coalitions than by the United States. The implicit division of labor by which American forces do the major work of conventional war, and allies do the follow-up of peace-keeping, will not be established in principle, but it seems to have partially emerged in practice.⁴ In the context of America’s recent reluctant embroilment in nation-building in Iraq, nothing at present appears to be working in the other direction. The United States may participate in humanitarian interventions, but more probably as a junior partner and with token contingents. If the crisis in Liberia in 2003, or Darfur later, could not overcome the legacy of Somalia in 1993 enough to energize prompt and decisive intervention, few “normal” emergencies will. In most cases where the United States has participated in such interventions in recent times, humanitarian concerns were not enough to explain the

4 This division of labor was suggested by John Hillen, “Superpowers Don’t Do Windows,” *Orbis*, Vol. 41, No. 2 (Spring 1997), pp. 242–43. Hillen recently became U.S. Assistant Secretary of State for Political-Military Affairs.

action. Linkage with material national interests was usually a necessary condition (for example, preventing an influx of refugees from Haiti in 1994).⁵

Three conditions could make the United States a more enthusiastic practitioner of humanitarian uses of force. One would be the imminent prospect of another shameful large-scale *genocide* like Rwanda's in 1994. Burundi is a case in point, where preliminary warning of the danger has long existed. Even on this, however, U.S. action cannot be assumed. Large-scale atrocities in the Darfur region of Sudan have been decried by the U.S. government, but no direct military intervention to suppress the atrocities took place.

Another condition would be the advent of stable inter-state peace throughout the areas in which the United States has been strategically engaged. This would leave the U.S. armed forces with no preferred missions, and in danger of withering away if they lacked other rationales for deployment. At the end of the Cold War, this seemed almost possible, as then-Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff Colin Powell said, "I'm running out of demons. I'm running out of villains. I'm down to Castro and Kim Il Sung."⁶ As the Balkans deteriorated and the United States found itself in a war over Kosovo, as Saddam Hussein rebounded after the first Persian Gulf War, and as Iran's sponsorship of terrorism and its nuclear program become more of a problem, the post-Cold War optimism declined. With the overthrow of Saddam Hussein in 2003, however, and the replacement of an inter-state war with an internal counterinsurgency war, the number of contingencies in which the United States might plausibly fight a conventional war against another state again looks low. At present it appears likely that political and diplomatic realities, as well as fear of another involvement in guerrilla warfare like that in Iraq, will ensure that confrontations with Iran and North Korea will be handled through negotiation and deterrence rather than actual force. Over the long term, however, it is probable that growing Chinese power will make planning for conflict with that country a main mission for the U.S. military. This is by no means

5 Kimberly Zisk Marten, *Enforcing the Peace: Learning from the Imperial Past* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2004), pp. 74–77.

6 Quoted in *Newsweek*, April 22, 1991.

inevitable, since China's rise could falter, or political accommodation might be negotiated, but it would be an unusual event in world history for friction not to arise between a dominant power and a power whose rise challenges that position.⁷

To whatever extent conventional contingencies are diminished, however, previously disdained missions such as peacekeeping would then have to be welcomed, lest the military have no operational missions at all. Inter-state peace, impressive enough to have this effect would require at least the elimination of the two principal remaining "rogue" regimes and their replacement with compliant, friendly governments, and resolution of the Taiwan problem; it would be most likely with more thoroughgoing change such as integration of Russia in the West (including membership in NATO) and democratization of China. All in all, these developments are possible but improbable.

The third condition would be the coming to power of politically secure liberal interventionists in the White House and Congress. The Clinton administration was dominated by these instincts, but did not have the domestic political support necessary to move more than erratically in that direction. The Bush administration began in opposition to this sense of missionary responsibility for spreading democracy, but came to embrace it after September 11th, only to have the impulse put back on the defensive by the mess in Iraq. The election of liberal interventionists would have most effect if the domestic change coincided with either of the first two of the above-mentioned conditions in the outside world.

The interventionist impulse in America is both hard to suppress and hard to indulge. It is hard to suppress because it is rooted in the liberal ideology that underpins American political culture, the conviction that America is a model for the world.⁸ This conviction, which

7 For differing estimates of prospects for conflict see Richard Bernstein and Ross Munro, "The Coming Conflict with America," and Robert Ross, "Beijing as a Conservative Power," both in *Foreign Affairs*, Vol. 76, No. 2 ((March/April 1997), and Richard K. Betts and Thomas J. Christensen, "China: Getting the Questions Right," *The National Interest*, No. 62 (Winter 2000/01).

8 See Louis Hartz, *The Liberal Tradition in America: An Interpretation of American Political Thought Since the Revolution* (New York: Harcourt, Brace, 1955), Chapter 11; Tony Smith, *America's Mission: The United States and the Worldwide Struggle*

seems arrogant to many foreigners, seems innocent and noble to most Americans, and is prominent in both major political parties.⁹ The interventionist impulse is often hard to indulge, however, because Americans do not want to pay significant costs for this mission, and are periodically surprised by how costly—and ineffective—intervention can turn out to be. So there is a cycle of sorts, between intervention and retrenchment.¹⁰ The disastrous result of the U.S. occupation of Iraq may pull Americans back from military activism, but probably not for long. The retrenchment after Vietnam lasted only a decade, until the Cold War was reinvigorated with the collapse of detente. A rising China might have a similar effect a decade from now.

Unconventional counter-terror operations will be frequent. These will be attempted whenever possible—at least until Al Qaeda is neutralized—something which could be far in the future. The only conditions under which counterterrorism might recede to minor activity would be retrenchment of U.S. presence abroad so dramatic that it turned terrorists with global-reach away from focusing on American interference in their societies as a prime grievance. At the least that would mean evacuation of the Middle East and the end of massive U.S. diplomatic, military, and financial support to Israel. There are no indications that the United States would change its policies so radically.

Conventional wars between states will be rare. Inter-state wars became rare altogether after the mid-20th century, and most civil wars have been unconventional, guerrilla-style wars. Looking forward, the disincentives to the United States to take on North Korea or Iran militarily are substantial. Hardly any other major powers appear inclined to engage each other, or to be challenged by weaker countries, at the conventional level.

The inhibitions against attempting to do to North Korea what the United States did to Iraq in 2003 are overwhelming: (1) the experience in Iraq since the fall of Baghdad will make any U.S. government wary

for *Democracy in the Twentieth Century* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1994).

9 Richard K. Betts, "The Political Support System for American Primacy," *International Affairs* (London), Vol. 81, No. 1 (January 2005).

10 See Frank J. Klingberg, "The Historical Alternation of Moods in American Foreign Policy," *World Politics*, Vol. 4, No. 2 (January 1952).

of assuming that conventional military success will end the problem; (2) air strikes alone would offer no assurance that North Korean nuclear capabilities had been fully destroyed, or that they could not be rebuilt; (3) the recent evolution of domestic politics in South Korea indicates that the United States would not only lack South Korea's support in military action, but would provoke strong South Korean opposition, which would make a war justified by Washington in terms of South Korean security appear both ludicrous and tremendously dangerous; and (4) the role of China in North Korea, and China's larger importance in the regional balance of power, would risk making a U.S. attack counterproductive on the larger world stage.

One big potential exception to the obsolescence of inter-state war is the India-Pakistan conflict, where miscalculation and unplanned escalation could overwhelm mutual nuclear deterrence. Americans who became accustomed to the stability of mutual nuclear deterrence during the Cold War underestimate the danger inherent in the unresolved issue of Kashmir and the lingering grudges of more than half a century of bitterness between the two countries.¹¹ Another case lower in probability but higher in consequence for the United States would be a U.S.-PRC war over Taiwan. This is potentially the most dangerous contingency, since it is not under the control of either Beijing or Washington, if moves toward independence by Taiwan provoke action that the People's Republic would prefer to avoid. The asymmetry of power (favoring the United States) and asymmetry of stakes in the issue (favoring China) are a recipe for miscalculation, and make it doubly hard to predict how brinkmanship in such a crisis would play out.

Use of weapons of mass destruction (WMD) is the biggest uncertainty. The first catastrophic incident (tens of thousands of fatalities) would change trends in unpredictable ways. It could plausibly trigger either panicked retreat from confrontation and a groundswell for disarmament, on one hand, or indiscriminate preventive wars on the other. Use

11 Kenneth Waltz sees nuclear weapons as a stabilizing force but rests his argument on the dubious similarity between conflicts in South Asia and those between the United States and Soviet Union in the Cold War. Scott D. Sagan and Kenneth N. Waltz, *The Spread of Nuclear Weapons: A Debate Renewed* (New York: W. W. Norton, 2003), Chapters 1 and 3.

of nuclear weapons is less likely than use of chemical weapons (CW) or biological weapons (BW), but is still not a negligible possibility. Inadvertent escalation in South Asia, or reckless escalation by North Korea, offer the main possibilities. Some believe that the lengthening tradition of non-use of nuclear weapons has created a self-reinforcing “taboo” against their use.¹² Today, the technology of nuclear fission is more than 60 years old, so it has been a major achievement to keep the list of nuclear-armed countries as short as it still is. By 2020, however, it will be three-quarters of a century since nuclear weapons were first used in combat. It would be an extraordinarily unusual achievement to find a major weapon still unused over such a span of time.

Use of chemical weapons somewhere is most likely, because they are comparatively easy to procure, but CW in most scenarios are not really in the mass destruction category.¹³ CW are also least likely to cause major changes in attitudes or policies because, having been used a number of times in recent decades, they are not unprecedented and therefore seem less shocking.

Use of biological weapons should be the greatest concern, in theory, because they combine the high killing-power of nuclear weapons and the comparative availability of CW. In practice, however, BW do not appear to have captured the imaginations of “rogue” regimes, or to frighten American leaders, to the extent that they should by virtue of their physical killing capacity. (This is peculiarly irrational, since the implicit comparison is often between crude and inefficient biological weapons and nuclear—or even thermonuclear—weapons of the sort possessed by the Cold War superpowers. The first generation fission weapons likely to be available to states in the Third World are far less destructive than the popular image, since they will probably only average a few kilotons in explosive yield.) Biological weapons of various sorts have been used at some points in history, but not yet on a large

12 Nina Tannenwald, “The Nuclear Taboo: The United States and the Normative Basis of Nuclear Non-Use,” *International Organization*, Vol. 53, No. 3 (Summer 1999).

13 Thomas L. McNaugher, “Ballistic Missiles and Chemical Weapons,” *International Security*, Vol. 15, No. 2 (Fall 1990), p. 19; Brad Roberts, “Chemical Disarmament and International Security,” *Adelphi Paper*, No. 267 (London: International Institute for Strategic Studies, Spring 1992), p. 6.

scale in modern times, and no state has yet attempted to brandish BW for deterrence or coercive leverage.¹⁴ For governments, nuclear weapons will probably remain the most sought options for countering the American threat; for non-state terrorist groups, CW and BW may be sought by default, as the only obtainable WMD for coercing or punishing Western countries.

International Institutions as Influences on Force

In the first decade after the Cold War many expected international institutions such as the United Nations to exert far greater control over the authorization and employment of military force. This did appear to happen in the 1991 Persian Gulf War. It also occurred especially in peace operations, as many such interventions were mandated by the UN, or at least by NATO, which although it is really an alliance, has come to be seen by many as a collective security organ.¹⁵

Such institutions play a role in blessing the use of force, and in coordinating the use of national contingents for participation in peacekeeping. They will be less significant for either inducing countries to employ force on a significant scale, or preventing them from doing so, when those countries’ governments reach different conclusions about the necessity of force. After all, there has only been one war fought by a United Nations command in all of history: the Korean War of 1950–53. And despite the fact that the UN Command remains in existence, in principle, in Korea, virtually no one considers it a significant fact mitigating unilateral U.S. control of the non-Korean forces stationed in the country in peacetime. The United Nations did mandate the war against Iraq in 1991, but it was not fought under a UN command.

For inducing intervention, the United Nations Security Council

14 See for example Sheldon Harris, “Japanese Biological Warfare Research on Humans: A Case Study of Microbiology and Ethics,” *Annals of the New York Academy of Sciences*, Vol. 666 (December 1992).

15 On the important differences between collective security systems and alliances, see G. F. Hudson, “Collective Security and Military Alliances,” in Herbert Butterfield and Martin Wight, eds., *Diplomatic Investigations: Essays in the Theory of International Politics* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1968).

(UNSC) does not move faster than the decisions of the member governments themselves. For preventing use of force, it is hard to think of a case in which a major power refrained from combat because it lacked permission from an international institution. The American assault on Iraq in 2003, despite the UNSC's refusal to authorize it, is the clearest example.

Do recent events herald a crisis for the UN, the danger as some see it that the organization will become irrelevant in the years leading to 2020? No—or at least not any more than was true for most of the UN's history, when the Cold War hobbled the Security Council. The recent humbling of the Security Council and secretary-general by the unilateral American decision to wage war against Iraq marks not a new departure but a reversion to the pattern of superpower behavior in the first four decades of the UN's existence. This is a surprise to observers who mistook the 1990s pattern of superpower collaboration with the UN for a new authority of the UN, and who assumed that the UN and NATO would take over the regulation of security worldwide.

The notion that international law now requires UNSC authorization (or at least the sanction of a major regional organization like NATO) for waging war is an idea that grew in the past dozen years and achieved currency as the governments of small countries, their lawyer functionaries and diplomats, and international bureaucrats embraced it. This idea has in a subtle way become a vehicle for resistance to American hegemony, since it is the only way that weak states can hope to constrain the unilateralism of a superpower. While the United States will embrace the sanctity of international law in principle, however, it will interpret legal norms in a way that conform to the policies that it wishes to undertake. The fact that Washington has refused to adhere to the new International Criminal Court reflects the determination to keep U.S. law and U.S. institutions as the only controlling forces on American action in matters of national security and the physical security of individual American citizens. (In the economic realm the story is different, since for reasons of economic efficiency and gains to be made from trade, the United States has accepted the authority of the World Trade Organization.) Until recently it was easy to confuse the cooperation of great powers with procedures of international institutions on decisions about intervention—which occurred because interests of the countries

and of the institutions coincided in most post-Cold War cases—with the cession of sovereign prerogatives to make war. In the coming decades, cooperation of major powers with international institutions will continue to reflect common interests, but will not override major powers' own strategic decisions.

International Norms Limiting Uses of Force

Two distinct dimensions of the evolution of norms on permissible tactics in the application of force do not necessarily coincide: content and impact. That is, norms may develop that are not honored fully or in every case. The groups that control the content of norms may not control how much they actually affect decisions on whether or how to act militarily.

Prevalent norms will be shaped, will be usually observed, and will be taken most seriously by the large majority of countries in the world that do not engage in great power competition or major combat actions outside their own borders. Disinclined and unable to play in the same strategic league as the United States and a few other major powers, this majority exerts its greatest influence by collaborating through international organizations such as the United Nations or the new International Criminal Court to promote rules with content designed to be universal, and thereby to bind the great powers who do fight wars of consequence. In this respect the breadth of support for norms, which underwrites the claim to their universality and the obligation to observe them, is likely to be greater than the depth of their efficacy. In one sense, sanctification of norms is a way for the many and the weak to try to bind the few and the strong. This is the inverse of E. H. Carr's view of international law as the morality of the "have" nations imposed on the aggrieved "have-not" nations.¹⁶

For norms that are consistently in everyone's interest, effect will follow, but for ones that leave combatant states in occasionally prob-

16 Edward Hallett Carr, *The Twenty Years Crisis: An Introduction to the Study of International Relations*, Second Edition (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1946), pp. 176–79.

lematic positions, effects will be limited. At least in practice, the major powers will not accept “universal” rules that contravene their strategic interests, nor will smaller powers whose territorial or regime security is less than that of the majority in the “international community.” Or if the rules are accepted in principle, their interpretation by State Department or Foreign Ministry lawyers will ensure that violations are never admitted.

In any event, the content of norms on use of force is unlikely to change very much in two decades. (An exception may be norms for treatment of prisoners. After September 11th and the war in Afghanistan, the Bush administration felt compelled to revise the categories and rules for treatment of prisoners taken in the war against terror, and to devise the novel solution for handling “unlawful combatants” at the U.S. naval base in Guantanamo, Cuba.) The principal norm aimed at constraining force or assigning blame is the norm against aggression, which is quite old and is now accepted in principle by all. It is no closer to being defined in a way on which all agree, however, and has little effect on behavior. No country that starts a war ever admits that it is committing aggression; all rationalize any attack as defensive and legitimate. There is no reason to expect that by 2020 there will be more progress in establishing consensus on standards for charging aggression than there has been in the last century.

Norms have already evolved fairly far toward constrained standards for employment of weapons. Deliberate killing of civilians has been entirely delegitimized, and expectations of strong efforts to prevent accidental collateral damage have grown. (The most dramatic reflection of this trend is the recent institutionalization of direct oversight by lawyers in targeting processes for U.S. and NATO forces during and since the war over Kosovo.)¹⁷ It is unlikely that even the pressure of events would reverse the trend and promote formal recognition of more permissive criteria for killing.

Nevertheless, a significant minority of countries still seeks to develop—or to keep—inventories of nuclear weapons, despite the fact that such weapons’ principal effects are against noncombatants. The disjunction

¹⁷ General Wesley K. Clark, *Waging Modern War: Bosnia, Kosovo, and the Future of Combat* (New York: PublicAffairs, 2001), p. 224.

with norms against killing civilians is finessed by rationales based on the peaceful objective of deterrence and the aim of preventing war. The fact that proliferation is occurring, however, at the same time that nations ritually endorse the importance of norms protecting civilians in war, reflects the priority of security and strategy over rules divorced from particular situations.

Whatever the content of evolving norms may be, however, their impact will vary with the importance of the case. Practical pressures for relaxing constraints could come from a change in the priority placed on combat success. (This may already have happened in certain parts of the American war against terrorists, as reflected in the scandal over torture at Abu Ghraib prison and elsewhere.) When the users of force believe effective action to be required for their own genuinely vital interests, rather than for humanitarian purposes (the vital interests of others), and effectiveness is threatened by constraints in targeting, the users will be more likely to risk violating demanding standards for restraint. (We have probably already seen a more permissive application of targeting standards in U.S. bombing of Afghanistan in 2001 than in the Kosovo War two years before.) In that event explicit acceptance of civilian casualties—a revision of norms—will not be the solution. Rather, official rhetoric will more likely ignore the change in practice, explain controversial results as accidents and proclaim continued concern, or ignore the question altogether.

One development that could push norms even further toward restraining combat tactics would be the advent of revolutionary capabilities in non-lethal or “less-lethal” weapons.¹⁸ If novel instruments for subduing targets without destroying them become capable of decisive results not just in riot control but on the battlefield as well, many—especially in the nations of the international community that do not engage much in the use of force themselves—will push to establish the norm that such weapons become the prime military instruments. (This tendency would be greatest among countries whose conception of force focuses on peacekeeping and policing rather than regular war.)

¹⁸ *Nonlethal Technologies: Progress and Prospects*, Report of an Independent Task Force Sponsored by the Council on Foreign Relations (New York: Council on Foreign Relations, 1999).

Although there has been significant progress in research and development of less-lethal weapons, however, no such revolutionary change is yet on the horizon. Major powers will resist such demands, considering it militarily unrealistic to rely on non-lethal weapons for fundamental combat success.

Norms against collateral damage may be honored by less use of imprecise weaponry simply because technology and combat effectiveness mandate greater reliance on precision strikes. It is always easy to honor humanitarian norms when the requirements of combat effectiveness coincide with them. This combination of purpose may be less available for countries that lack the precision technology of the United States, but few such countries have been engaged in conventional military operations anyway, or seem likely to be major military actors (beyond internal actions to pacify their own countries) in the next couple decades. The exceptions would be “rogue” regimes defending themselves against attack, and they are unlikely to worry about international norms.

How clear will norms be? They will be most impressive if codified in international agreements and addressed by international institutions, such as the new International Criminal Court. Whether the United States feels bound by such formal declarations will depend primarily on who is in power in the United States, and what counterpressures there will be against accepting the new norms as international law. In recent times the great powers have more or less refused to be bound by restraints in treaties favored by the majority of states when the new norms inhibit desired military options—for example, the United States, China, and Russia initially refused to adhere to the treaty banning land mines, which most other countries who do not worry about performing a wide range of conventional military missions themselves were happy to embrace. When a U.S. administration lacks interest in preserving options constrained by emerging rules, Washington may embrace them, as in the Clinton administration’s endorsement of the Comprehensive Test Ban. The Senate’s rejection of that treaty, however, leaves few if any examples of American acceptance of new rules that preclude old established military operations.

Technological Change

For the United States, new technologies will have tactical effects on employment of force more than strategic ones. Capacity for real-time, detailed visual tracking of human targets, for example, will make it easier to mount discrete attacks by facilitating strikes at times and places where large-scale collateral damage can be avoided. This may make it easier at the margins of decision to use military instruments for counterterror operations, but should not change more general decisions about war or peace.

For American adversaries, however, the spread of old technologies (for WMD) could have major strategic consequences. If adversaries manage to acquire and deploy “finite” but secure nuclear deterrent forces, U.S. freedom of action will be constrained. This is potentially dangerous not only because Americans would prefer to have *carte blanche*, but because acceptance of this constraint may be tentative, ambivalent, and an occasion for miscalculation.

For 40 years of Cold War Americans took for granted that we could not liberate Russians or Eastern Europeans from their odious regimes. After the collapse of the Soviet Union, however, Americans stopped being accustomed to being deterred, and the dominance of deterrence as an overarching rationale for American strategy disappeared. Recent shifts in strategic doctrine toward reliance on ballistic missile defense and on preventive war have reinforced the notion that the United States should not be deterred from attacking other countries that deserve to be defeated. The United States was not deterred from attacking Iraq by what was thought at the time to be a potent Iraqi stock of chemical and biological weapons capable of killing millions.¹⁹

Apparently for psychological reasons more than simple estimates of casualties that could result, the prospect of nuclear weapons in the hands of rogue states is more daunting to U.S. leaders. Readjusting to constraint from fear of even small nuclear retaliation could prove awk-

¹⁹ For elaboration of these arguments see Richard K. Betts, “What Will It Take to Deter the United States?” *Parameters: The Journal of the Army War College*, Vol. 25, No. 4 (Winter 1995–96), and Betts, “Suicide from Fear of Death?” *Foreign Affairs*, Vol. 82, No. 1 (January/February 2003).

ward, but could easily happen in the near future. It has already implicitly begun to happen in the Bush administration's moves to mollify North Korea's concern with regime security.

If a crisis occurs, however, recent American rhetoric and actions suggest that "rogue" regimes' finite nuclear deterrents might not be sufficient to deter U.S. attack. Then the odds that such a regime could manage to deliver a handful of nuclear weapons (perhaps in combination with biological weapons) against U.S. cities via clandestine means, or by airbreathing systems such as jumbo jets from national airlines or cruise missiles from merchant ships, would become crucial.

How Will Other Countries React to the Use of U.S. Power?

Responses will run the gamut, according to the degree that countries beholding American power feel threatened by it. They will react by cooperating, carping, cowering, collaborating, or countering.

Cooperating. Some allied governments like Blair's Britain, or those who foresee diplomatic and economic benefits from bandwagoning (like what Secretary of Defense Donald Rumsfeld called "the new Europe," or newly independent countries near Russia that want American patronage) will line up and ask no questions. American primacy may be so great that few states see any hope in contesting it.²⁰

Carping. Skeptical allies or other countries that oppose American uses of force will probably react rhetorically more than actively, criticizing from the sidelines, charging the United States with immoral, illegal, arrogant, myopic, and counterproductive muscle-flexing. In theory, we might expect that other countries will form counterbalancing coalitions to check American power. For more than a dozen years, however, the United States has been the sole superpower or hyper-power and has exerted that power frequently (for example, fighting twice as many wars in the short post-Cold War period, at a fraction of the cost in blood and treasure, as during the four-decade Cold War) but has not yet provoked real balancing action. Despite much finger-shaking, other

20 William C. Wohlforth, "The Stability of a Unipolar World," *International Security*, Vol. 24, No. 1 (Summer 1999).

major powers have not done anything concrete to oppose U.S. initiatives. Even the sort of "soft" balancing predicted by Robert Pape—foot-dragging and diplomatic obstructionism—has been notable by how little there is of it so far.²¹

Cowering. Realism about material self-interest should make helpless adversaries lie low and avoid provocation, hoping to escape being targeted. Three types of exceptions may react instead with reckless confrontation.

One exception would be a religiously motivated regime that believes God is on its side (for example, Iran at the height of its revolution two decades ago, or Pakistan after a revolution or radical coup d'état a decade from now), or that moral rather than material interests are the measure of policy.

Another exception would be rogue regimes that see U.S. demands leaving them no possibility of survival even if they make concessions—those who believe they are in the position of Saddam Hussein in 2002. At present it is hard to see which countries could be such low-hanging fruit for the United States as Iraq seemed to be before the conquest of Baghdad—countries with no allies or options for either deterring or appeasing Washington.

The third exception is a fanatical secular regime like North Korea—although North Korea may be *sui generis*. Pyongyang's penchant for acting like a state with delusions of equality has been fed by a unique record of success in provocation from a position of weakness. Consider that remarkable record: in the 1960s, the Blue House raid, seizure of the *Pueblo*, and shooting down of the EC-121; in the 1970s, murder of American officers in the tree-cutting incident, assassination of President Park's wife, and tunneling under the DMZ; in the 1980s, bombing of the South Korean cabinet in Rangoon and of an airliner in flight; in the 1990s, threats that imposition of economic sanctions would trigger war; and over long spans of time, kidnappings and commando infiltra-

21 Robert A. Pape, "Soft Balancing Against the United States," T. V. Paul, "Soft Balancing in the Age of U.S. Primacy," Stephen G. Brooks and William C. Wohlforth, "Hard Times for Soft Balancing," and Keir A. Lieber and Gerard Alexander, "Waiting for Balancing: Why the World is Not Pushing Back," all in *International Security*, Vol. 30, No. 1 (Summer 2005).

tions. *None* of these initiatives produced forcible U.S. retaliation, and in 1994 Pyongyang's resistance to being called to account for violation of the Nuclear Nonproliferation Treaty prompted American accommodation rather than violence. Constraints on U.S. action against North Korea are even greater now.

Collaborating. Although counterbalancing against American primacy has not happened yet, there is no reason that it cannot. One counter-coalition that would be both plausible and potent would be an anti-American alliance of Russia and China. Tensions between both countries and Washington have fluctuated, and are low at the moment, but U.S. policy on NATO expansion, the Balkans, moving bases into Central Asia, and defense of Taiwan provide long-term sources of conflict between the United States and both countries, and an incentive to them to subordinate their suspicions of each other to cooperate against the common threat of American pressure. Such an alliance becomes more likely if conflict over the Taiwan issue grows at the same time as conflict between Russia and NATO over such matters as the status of Russians in Estonia.

Countering. Fanatical or desperate adversaries will seek to counter the United States by mobilizing diplomatic and political support for opposition to American force, or by developing "asymmetric" means of deterrence and retaliation. North Korea, for example, tends to act not like a realistic weak state, but like a suicidal one, ready to bring others down with it. It, or other "rogue" regimes, may try confrontational strategies, despite the gross imbalance of power. They will do this if they see no alternative to guarantee survival. They may also do this for the purpose of deterring the United States. The danger then is that Washington will see not deterrence, but provocation, and the deterrent strategy may provoke preventive war as an American response.