Strategic Insight

WMD Proliferation and Conventional Counterforce: The Case of Iraq

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Press reports indicate that the Bush administration is finalizing a national security strategy document that advocates preventive military attacks to stop states from developing weapons of mass destruction. The palpable hue and cry against such an idea is easy to understand since it overturns a policy that traditionally has guided U.S. thinking on addressing weapons of mass destruction (WMD) proliferation. For decades the United States chose to rely on multilateral control regimes and diplomatic or economic pressures against states seeking to acquire WMD. Indeed, one notable exception to this policy has been the effort undertaken by both Republican and Democratic administrations over the last decade to use military force to slow or destroy Iraq's efforts to acquire nuclear, chemical and biological weapons.

The Bush administration's ideas on preventive war and pre-emption should come as no surprise. In the post September 11 environment, the choice has been made to take the war to U.S. adversaries and to not allow hostile states or non-state actors to develop potentially threatening capabilities. President Bush told the country during his address to West Point cadets in June 2002 that U.S. security "…will require all Americans to be forward-looking and resolute, to be ready for preemptive action when necessary to defend our liberty and to defend our lives."

New Requirements for Conventional Counterforce

There is a strong preference for pre-emption to take the form of conventional counterforce strikes, especially standoff attacks by precision-guided munitions. Large conventional military operations, however, have not been ruled out by the administration. Moreover, nuclear weapons may be necessary against certain targets - particularly those associated with WMD. The Nuclear Posture Review (NPR), released in January 2002, identified a requirement to target 1,400 underground facilities worldwide that are associated with WMD, ballistic missile basing and command and control. These underground facilities cannot be held at risk by conventional weapons, and eventually will require the development of an earth penetrating nuclear munition to guarantee their destruction.

The NPR calls for the closer integration of nuclear and conventional forces into a seamless web capable of holding a wide array of targets at risk. The NPR also suggests that conventional munitions can now be assigned targets that were once assigned to nuclear weapons. Both the conventional and nuclear force structure components are to be integrated into a more responsive instrument for use by adaptive planning, made possible by the advances in command, control, communications, computers and intelligence as part of the revolution in military affairs.

The Gulf and the Case of Iraq

Nowhere is this emerging threat environment more acute and the likelihood of pre-emptive conventional counterforce attack higher than in the Middle East. In January 2002, the CIA identified Libya, Syria, Egypt, Sudan, Iran and Iraq as countries actively seeking to develop WMD. The Nuclear Posture Review specifically identified Iraq, Iran, Syria and Libya as countries in the region that could be involved in

contingencies that might require the United States to use nuclear weapons. The threat in the Gulf seems particularly high, especially the threat posed to forward deployed U.S. forces in Kuwait, Saudi Arabia, Bahrain, Qatar, the United Arab Emirates and Oman. And hardly a day goes by without a senior administration official emphasizing the threat to international peace and security posed by Iraq's unmonitored WMD programs. In addition to building a general causus belli for forcible regime change in Baghdad, the case also is being built implicitly for a pre-emptive conventional counterforce strike to disarm Iraq's suspected chemical, biological and nuclear weapons infrastructure.

Iraq is one country that has suffered repeated conventional counterforce strikes as other states have attempted to destroy its WMD capabilities. Starting with the Israeli strike on Iraq's French-supplied nuclear reactor at Osiraq in June 1980 and ending with Operation Desert Fox in December 1998, numerous attacks have been made on Iraq's WMD infrastructure in an attempt to disarm and/or disrupt these threatening programs. While the aerial campaign during the Gulf War represented the most sustained and intensive of these efforts, other selective attacks in response to various UNSCOM crises during the 1990s also targeted Iraq's WMD programs.

The main rationale for the last sustained attacks on Iraq during Operation Desert Fox was to degrade Saddam Hussein's ability to make and to use weapons of mass destruction. Desert Fox saw American and British warplanes fly more than 650 strike and strike support sorties. Naval vessels launched more than 325 Tomahawk cruise missiles, and U.S. Air Force B-52s launched more than 90 cruise missiles. In all, 100 targets were attacked, including 27 surface-to-air missile sites, 18 command and control facilities, 19 sites housing security details for Hussein's weapons of mass destruction program, 11 weapons of mass destruction industrial and production facilities, eight Republican Guard facilities, and five airfields.

Has Conventional Counterforce Worked in Iraq?

So did the United States succeed or fail in these efforts to control and/or eliminate Iraq's WMD capabilities? And what are the lessons that can be drawn upon as the United States and its allies move towards a confrontation with Iraq that will probably feature conventional counterforce attacks against Baghdad's WMD capability? And, what are the implications of our experience in Iraq for the general idea of pre-emptive conventional counterforce as a means to address WMD proliferation?

- Measuring success or failure is a difficult proposition, but it is undoubtedly the case that Iraq's WMD programs have been greatly hindered -- particularly its nuclear program, by the strike on Osiraq and the Desert Storm bombardment. Iraq would almost certainly possess nuclear weapons by now without these actions. But, as noted in various UNSCOM reports, Iraq retained the body of expertise to build a weapon, and nuclear breakout remains possible, particularly with the impending relaxation in the U.N. trade embargo. Expertise and knowledge on all Iraq's WMD programs remains extant, and, of course, is impossible to destroy with force alone. Eliminating the WMD threat posed by Iraq will require more than well-placed high explosives; it will require a fundamental change in Iraqi leadership, politics and policy.
- As for long-range missiles, clearly Iraq would have a more a viable missile program if its facilities had not been systematically targeted during the 1990s. UNSCOM estimated that Iraq retains several dozen SCUDs, but the presence of inspectors and the targeting of Iraq's missile infrastructure during various attacks in the 1990s have made it more difficult for Iraq to operate and maintain this force. Iraq, however, maintains an active missile program to develop the Al Samoud rocket, and Iraq is rumored to have moved missile equipment out of the WMD sites that were targeted by the Desert Fox strikes. The warehouses destroyed in Desert Fox have in all likelihood been rebuilt, and without inspectors it is difficult to know what is going on inside the reconstituted facilities and whether the removed equipment has been returned.
- It is almost impossible to assess the impact of conventional counterforce strikes on Iraq's chemical and biological programs. This is in part due to the limited infrastructure required for these programs and the ease with which these sites can be concealed. Before the Gulf War, Iraq concentrated these programs in industrial-park-type areas. As part of the concealment effort during the UNSCOM-era, Iraq moved these programs out of such easily identifiable sites and into

the basements of Baghdad, making them almost impossible to find and target. UNSCOM assessed that Iraq maintained an active stockpile of chemical munitions; with accounting discrepancies so numerous that made it difficult to judge what chemical munitions are retained by Iraq. Iraq's biological program remains a black hole and there is almost no basis to judge its extant capabilities.

Conclusions

As the United States fleshes out its ideas of pre-emption and conventional counterforce targeting as a way to address WMD proliferation, it would do well to examine the case of Iraq. In Iraq, conventional counterforce strikes delayed and complicated Saddam's efforts to develop and maintain WMD capabilities, but it neither disarmed the regime nor did it eliminate the threat. In Iraq, at least, sustained conventional counterforce strikes over the better part of a decade have not -- even in conjunction with an on-site arms control regime -- prevented Iraq from maintaining its proscribed programs. During the 1990s, Iraq's WMD capabilities -- composed of knowledge, production equipment, facilities and actual weapons -- proved to be impossible to destroy by force. While the United States succeeded in destroying various physical sites during its many attacks spanning the decade, Iraq's WMD programs still are apparently alive and well.

If there is any broader lesson for emerging U.S. strategy, it is that the United States should avoid believing its own press releases about the impressive capabilities of its standoff precision guided munitions and the infallibility of its intelligence even as it trumpets these capabilities to its adversaries. Precision strike conventional counterforce (dependent on intelligence for targeting) is but one tool available to the United States to deal with the emerging threat environment, but it must be employed within the context of a broader campaign using a variety of means to disarm a hostile state's WMD. It is not a panacea. Precision-guided munitions can temporarily set back Iraq's efforts to acquire nuclear, chemical and biological weapons or destroy known weapons stockpiles, but only a fundamental change in Baghdad's political agenda can eliminate the long-term threat it poses to the international community.

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