

Deconflating “WMD”

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WMDC

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Few acronyms are as well known as “WMD,” referring to “Weapons of Mass Destruction.” “WMD” has become ubiquitous shorthand in governmental pronouncements, academic writings, and media coverage around the world, particularly in the run up to and aftermath of the war in Iraq. The acronym usually refers to nuclear, biological and chemical weapons.¹

When used for stylistic convenience, “WMD” is a harmless way to connote weapons that have a significantly greater capacity to terrify and coerce populations than conventional weapons do. However, the acronym can be dangerous when political leaders, media and citizenry use it in assessing and acting against international threats. “WMD” mixes threats that should be distinguished. This imprecision often extends into assessments of threatening actors and the motivations behind them. U.S. officials offered vague and muddled depictions of Iraq’s capabilities and intentions in making the case for war, as in the following statement by President Bush: the threat “arises directly from the Iraqi regime’s own actions – its history of aggression, and its drive toward an arsenal of terror...The danger is already significant and it only grows with time. If we know Saddam Hussein has dangerous weapons today – and we do – does it make any sense for the world to wait to confront him as he grows even stronger and develops even more dangerous weapons.”²

This paper describes some counter-productive effects of conflating nuclear, chemical and biological weapons. It then urges greater distinction in assessing the political utilities that states and terrorists may see in each type of weapon. This analytic rigor and openness is

¹ Ballistic missiles and radiological weapons also sometimes are folded into the broad category of WMD.

² President Bush, Cincinnati, Ohio, October 7, 2002.

necessary to check the recent tendency to assert *categorically* that “rogue” states and terrorists cannot be deterred and will not respond to diplomacy or policy changes that address their concerns. The paper concludes by urging greater focus on redressing the motivations that states and terrorists may have to use these weapons, which is the most effective way to reduce threats from all “WMD”.

Chemical, biological and nuclear weapons have distinct physical and political effects.

Generally nuclear weapons pose the greatest physical and political threat to international security and are the least susceptible to defenses.³ Nuclear weapons inflict their damage instantly and produce long-lasting effects that are difficult to mitigate. Nuclear weapons destroy social infrastructure as well as life, making the challenge of recovery all the more onerous. Under some scenarios, the use of nuclear weapons could set off a chain of escalating retaliatory attacks that could devastate whole areas of the globe. More positively, fissile materials for nuclear weapons are more difficult to produce than are chemical or biological weapon agents, and the existing supplies of these materials are finite enough to be secured with confidence if this were a priority.

Politically, the effects of nuclear weapon use are hard to anticipate. This uncertainty stems partly from the fact that some states are allowed to possess nuclear weapons, while others are not. If one of the currently legitimate possessors used nuclear weapons in a situation that many other countries judged unnecessary – i.e., not as an ultimate last resort to save the state against a mortal threat – then the backlash could be great not only against that

³ Even if one assumes that ballistic missile defenses would work perfectly, they are not applicable against many other means of delivering nuclear weapons. Regarding scale, one reason why U.S. (and other?) nuclear establishments seek to develop low-yield nuclear weapons is to confine their destructiveness and therefore reduce doubts about their usability. These doubts arise because massive and indiscriminate damage raises moral and political issues that make leaders reluctant to use these weapons. Thus, the argument goes, low-yield weapons would enhance deterrence because their use would be more credible. In physical terms, then, the relative scale-effects of nuclear weapons could be subject to change.

state but also the current structure of the international system.⁴ The legitimacy of the five nuclear-weapon states as permanent, veto-holding members of the UN Security Council could come under challenge, especially if the initial user of nuclear weapons used its veto-power to block international sanction in the aftermath. (As discussed below, use of chemical or biological weapons would not challenge the structure and rules of the international system as much as it would highlight failure to enforce norms and rules that already exist.)

Biological weapons pose the next level of threat, and their danger appears to be rising with technological progress.⁵ Engineered pathogens and improved delivery would yield horrific potential destructiveness from these weapons, although the number of actors capable of weaponizing biological agents is often exaggerated. Still, given the relative newness of biotechnology it is prudent to think that the potential scale of biological weapon threats will grow.

The possibility of defending against biological weapons and limiting their effects modulates their threat somewhat. Their military utility is further limited by the difficulty of controlling their effects, including ensuring that one's own forces and population are not threatened. This constraint would not apply to a terrorist group bent simply on exterminating a population.

The illegitimacy of biological weapons helps to prevent their acquisition and use, and to lower the political impact if they were used. Were such weapons used, it is unlikely that the international community would move to re-legitimize them and distribute them more equitably to balance the power of the world's leading states, as could happen after a state used

⁴ In 1996 the International Court of Justice concluded by a narrow majority that "the threat or use of nuclear weapons would generally be contrary to the rules of international law applicable to armed conflict, and in particular to the principles and laws of humanitarian law; However, ...the Court cannot conclude definitively whether the threat or use of nuclear weapons would be lawful or unlawful in an extreme circumstance of self-defence, in which the very survival of a State would be at stake." This was a non-binding judgment, but the condemnation of using nuclear weapons in circumstances short of threat to the existence of the state comports with the taboo that has developed around nuclear use since 1945.

⁵ For an outstanding treatment of biological weapons, particularly bioterrorism, see Marc L. Ostfield, "Bioterrorism as a Foreign Policy Issue," SAIS Review, Winter 2004, pp. 131-146. See also Christopher F. Chyba, "Toward Biological Security," Foreign Affairs, May/June 2002, p. 122.

nuclear weapons. Rather, the most likely response would be tougher enforcement of the existing norm against biological weapons.

Minimizing the BW threat requires more than just arms control measures to control supplies. National and international public health systems need to be upgraded. These improvements would be a “dual-use” public good of the sort one rarely sees in the world. Also needed is stronger scientific peer review and regulation of research activity, as recommended by John Steinbruner and Elisa Harris.⁶ The need for regulation and public-private cooperation stems from the fact that, unlike nuclear weapons, biological weapons can be produced practically anywhere, using readily and relatively cheaply available dual-use equipment.

Chemical weapons are significantly less threatening than both biological and nuclear weapons. They are more subject to passive defenses than biological weapons are. While chemical weapons have been and perhaps will be more frequently used than biological or nuclear weapons, their physical and political effects are more manageable.⁷

If nuclear, biological, and chemical weapons pose different threats, these differences are magnified or shrunk by the nature of the state being targeted. A successful biological weapon attack on Tel Aviv or Cairo would have a much larger impact on Israel or Egypt than would such an attack on one city in China or the United States. Military-strategic utilities vary not only with the nature and quantity of the weapon used but also with the size and capacity of the state being targeted. To the extent that large states with nuclear weapons tend to shape the priorities of the international security system, their perspective on the relative military utilities of nuclear, biological and chemical weapons probably are not universal.

⁶ Steinbruner and Harris, “Controlling Dangerous Pathogens,” *Issues in Science and Technology*, Spring 2003, pp. 47-54.

⁷ Exceptions exist to every blanket statement: were large chemical factories to be attacked in certain ways the resultant application of “chemical weapons” could be of an unprecedentedly large scale.

Notwithstanding these distinctions, the international community must do everything it can to deny both states and terrorists *supply* of nuclear, biological and chemical weapons and the know-how, material, and other means to produce and deliver them. This typically is the work of arms control and security and intelligence communities. Distinguishing levels of threat posed by these different categories of weapons should help prioritize allocation of scarce resources to these supply-side control efforts. Fortunately, many of the laws, rules, customs and intelligence capabilities used to detect and interdict one category of weapon will be useful in blocking supplies of others, too.

Enforcing international peace and security against proliferation threats always involves trade offs. Sanctions may harm economic interests of the sanctioning states as well as citizens of the sanctioned state. Military action to destroy suspect weapon capabilities or threatening regimes carries even greater risks to life, treasure and political order. In weighing such trade offs, distinctions among the types of threat should be made. Nuclear weapon threats would warrant more costly and risky action than chemical weapon threats, with biological weapon threats somewhere in between depending on the assessed nature of the agents, dispersal mechanisms and actors involved.

The U.S. and U.N. debates on going to war in Iraq failed to make rigorous cost/benefit analysis of the war in part because the threat was conflated under the rubric of “WMD.” Debaters did not consider where along the WMD spectrum the threat lay and, in particular, whether greater emphasis should have been placed on doubts about Iraq’s nuclear weapon capabilities, compared to its assumed possession of chemical weapons and some biological weapon agents. Nor did they consider that the most dangerous weapon – nuclear – is also the most detectable, the most expensive and difficult to make, and the most susceptible to nonproliferation techniques, whereas the weapons whose acquisition is hardest to prevent are less dangerous and more readily defended against.

If it is wise to parse physical differences among nuclear, biological and chemical weapon threats, it is even more useful to examine the political utilities different states and terrorist organizations attach to these weapons. In the U.S., especially, the tendency is to assume that the states and terrorists now seeking “WMD” will use them if they can get them. Racing to this conclusion without careful analysis of particular actors and types of weapons causes policy-makers to miss possible signs that threats can be deterred or even removed peacefully.

In the run up to the Iraq war, for example, high-level U.S. officials asserted that Saddam Hussein must be immediately removed because he could not reliably be deterred either from using “WMD” or transferring them to undeterrable terrorists. The CIA disputed this assessment, to little effect. Today, as concerns mount over Iran’s and North Korea’s acquisition of nuclear weapons, international policy-makers and citizens would benefit from greater clarity regarding the conditions under which leaders of these states would use the weapons they are believed to possess or seek.

The need for concentrated, differentiated analysis of threatening actors is even greater in the case of terrorists. Conventional wisdom (not just in the West) holds that organizations such as Al Qaeda cannot be deterred because they are not focused on self-preservation, do not value human life as most state leaderships do, do not have territory over whose sovereignty they wish to preside, and live as parasites on relatively innocent bodies of host communities that cannot justly be targeted by massive military reprisal.⁸ Deterrence fails to operate if actors are not guided ultimately by self-preservation and cannot be credibly targeted.

⁸ The al Qaeda network “is trying to do everything they can...to get their hands on deadlier weapons, on chemical or biological agents, or perhaps, even a nuclear weapon if they could,” U.S. Vice President Cheney said on September 17, 2004. “And there’s no doubt in anybody’s mind – there shouldn’t be – that if they ever acquire that kind of capability, that they will, in fact, use it because there’s nothing to deter them from doing that.” Washington Post, September 19, 2004, p. A12.

However, this assumption should be questioned logically and empirically. For example, the PLO for decades was subject to deterrence, and the IRA operated within limits. Indeed, the most competent terrorist organizations, including al Qaeda and Hezbollah evince a strong commitment to justice, as they perceive it. Wanting others to see the justice of their cause requires some constraint on behavior so as to win sympathy with their constituencies and with those in the international community that they are trying to influence in what is a political-military struggle.⁹ Al Qaeda, for example, usually offers a post facto justification for its attacks, which typically are directed at institutions used to impose neocolonial rule on Muslim populations, rather than at large populations of civilians.¹⁰ The celebration of martyrdom is not evidence that these organizations do not seek self-preservation at the strategic level. Suicide attacks are a tactic; the *strategy* of these groups is to persevere and grow, not self-destruct.

Analytically, at least, it should be possible to devise strategies to enhance political interests in self-restraint from using nuclear, chemical, or biological weapons. Rather than ending analysis of terrorists by categorizing them as irrational barbarians, Western experts and policy-makers should seek to understand the narratives and motives that animate terrorists and the broader populations that support them. Even if terrorists themselves cannot be deterred by military force, they could be constrained by strategies that make “host” societies and states clarify their revulsion over the possible use of chemical, biological or nuclear weapons.

⁹ For an important elaboration of this point relative to al Qaeda and the broader Islamist “insurgency,” see Anonymous, *Imperial Hubris: Why the West Is Losing The War on Terror* (Washington, DC: Brassey’s Inc., 2004). Anonymous is a long-time CIA analyst specializing on al Qaeda, Afghanistan and South Asia.

¹⁰ In a November 2001 interview, Osama Bin Laden sought to justify the killing of civilians by saying “The September 11 attacks were not targeted at women and children. The real targets were America’s icons of military and economic power.” Moreover, these attacks were in self-defense, he argued: “American and its allies are massacring us in Palestine, Chechnya, Kashmir and Iraq. The Muslims have the right to attack America in reprisal.” Interview, *Dawn*, November 10, 2001. The point is not to endorse bin Laden’s justification, only to cite his belief that he needed one, and that it had to be rooted in a scheme of justice.

Indeed, deliberation and debate on the use of nuclear, biological or chemical weapons should be encouraged within international Muslim communities. The few scholars who recently have explored this issue note that Muslims did not participate in the moral, philosophical, and strategic debates over nuclear deterrence and possible use during the Cold War. The absence of established doctrine on using weapons of mass destruction apparently prompted Osama bin Laden to request a treatise on the matter, which was issued by a well-known Saudi scholar in May 2003. It concluded “If the infidels can be repelled from the Muslims only by using such weapons, their use is permissible, even if you kill them without exception [discrimination] and destroy their tillage and stock [the environment].” But this treatise itself cites differences among Islamic scholars on many of these questions. Indeed, Sunni and Shia jurists may view these matters differently. Iranian officials have insisted for several years that their leader, Ayatollah Khomeini issued a fatwa proscribing nuclear weapons on Islamic grounds. The political utility, and therefore attractiveness of nuclear, biological or chemical weapons is non-uniform and contingent. The international community needs to understand the variables that might move contingent decisions one way or another.

Just as it is important to distinguish physical characteristics of possible threats, and the interests of threatening actors, so too greater attention must be paid to the political context in which threats may occur. The political utility of nuclear weapons differs by circumstance. If a terrorist group or state were to use nuclear weapons against a non-nuclear adversary, it would likely lose rather than gain political standing. Conversely, if a group or state were to use nuclear weapons against a repressive nuclear-armed adversary it might assume little political liability.

The utility of chemical and biological weapons has been limited by their lack of political and moral legitimacy. The Chemical Weapons Convention and Biological and Toxin Weapons Convention call for all such weapons to be eliminated. Too many key states have refused to join these treaties, or have joined but not complied fully with their terms, but these weapons are now *morally and politically* so useless that no state declares its possession of them except when announcing decisions to abolish them. These weapons could be further neutralized if UN Security Council permanent members Russia and China removed doubt in their compliance with one or both treaties and raised the prospect of tough Security Council action against any actor that would use such weapons.

The political utility of nuclear weapons is much more difficult to quash. Under the NPT, five countries are permitted to possess nuclear weapons. A further three states -- India, Israel and Pakistan -- did not sign the treaty and thus are not barred from possessing these weapons. In varying degrees the eight “permitted” nuclear weapon possessors attach great political and military value to these weapons, and are seen to gain significant power and status through them. Because eight states are allowed to possess nuclear weapons, it is politically more difficult to make the acquisition and use of nuclear weapons anathema, and to rally all actors to pursue tough (and expensive) enforcement of nonproliferation rules.

WMD conflation makes it harder to reduce the political utility of each of these different types of weapons. If nuclear weapons are legitimate and of great prestige value for five-to-eight states, then non-status quo actors will be more tempted to see chemical and biological weapons as equalizers. The conflation of WMD can also psychologically elevate the value of CW/BW. If people lose the distinctions among “WMD” and begin to see “WMD” itself as the brand, then the heretofore less valuable chemical and biological categories begin to earn the same fear-respect-value as previously unrivalled nuclear weapons.

While imprecision in analyzing and talking about “WMD” threats obscures important policy choices, it is natural to search for common denominators that reduce multiple problems at once. The biggest common denominators that can reduce “WMD” threats are progress in resolving regional conflicts and reforming unjust governance.

The states and terrorist organizations that seek to acquire and possibly use these weapons are located primarily in three regions and are embroiled in common political-military struggles. The Middle East, including the Persian Gulf, hosts the Israeli nuclear arsenal, Iran’s nuclear program, a range of chemical and biological weapon arsenals and programs, unrepresentative governments, and numerous organizations that can variously be defined as terrorist. If these states do not achieve major internal reforms, and the international conflicts in the region are not resolved, then further proliferation should be expected. The same basic logic obtains in Northeast Asia, centered primarily around North Korea, and then the China-Taiwan relationship. In South Asia, anti-Indian insurgents supported by Pakistan exacerbate insecurity and the risks of nuclear conflict, while the military-controlled state of Pakistan fails to reassure the world that it will not be a source of proliferation. Indian security forces’ violations of Kashmiri citizens’ human rights fuel the conflict cycle.

These regional instabilities and proliferation dynamics are at least partially due to the internal character of key states. If, for example, Iran’s government could be reformed and its antipathies reduced, the risks of nuclear proliferation, and also of chemical and biological proliferation and use would be reduced. This, in turn, probably depends on changes in U.S. policy and attitudes, and in Israeli-Palestinian relations. If China decided that using the UN Security Council to enforce nonproliferation were more important than avoiding any precedent that would constrain its freedom of action vis a vis Taiwan, then the prospects of stemming proliferation would improve enormously across the board. If Pakistan could

become a status quo power and develop a well-functioning state apparatus, then the risks of spreading nuclear technology and know-how would be reduced around the world.

The handful of states possessing nuclear (and perhaps chemical and biological weapons) also conduct policies that Muslim terrorists now fight against. Changes in this small number but deeply rooted set of policies would reduce the threat of weapons of all kinds. This includes: Israel's treatment of the Palestinians, and the U.S. support of it; the refusal of terrorist organizations and supporting states to accept Israel's existence; the presence of U.S. and other Western troops on the Arabian Peninsula; Non-Muslim occupation of Iraq and Afghanistan; Russian, Indian, and Chinese mistreatment of Muslim minorities; Distribution and management of benefits from Arab energy resources; and the maintenance of apostate, corrupt, and repressive Muslim governments.¹¹ Each of these grievances reflects hugely complex and difficult issues and interests. Redressing any of these underlying grievances could reduce the risk simultaneously of nuclear, chemical and biological terrorism.

All of this recommends policies that focus as much on reforming regimes as on controlling specific technologies. Governmental regimes, not just weapons matter. Regime reform, if not regime change, is vital to preventing proliferation of nuclear, chemical and biological weapons. At this level, WMD conflation even makes sense: reform one regime, and you may mitigate risks in each category of WMD. Resolve one regional security conflict, and you dramatically reduce the overall risk of WMD proliferation and use. Hardcore, irredeemable terrorists may still remain, but their recruitment and support bases would be shrunken, leaving them more vulnerable to capture and killing.

¹¹ This list is paraphrased from Anonymous, *Imperial Hubris*, p. 241.

¹² This list is paraphrased from Anonymous, *Imperial Hubris*, p. 241.

List of published studies and papers

All papers and studies are available as pdf-files at the Commission's website: www.wmdcommission.org

No 1 "Review of Recent Literature on WMD Arms Control, Disarmament and Non-Proliferation" by Stockholm International Peace Research Institute, May 2004

No 2 "Improvised Nuclear Devices and Nuclear Terrorism" by Charles D. Ferguson and William C. Potter, June 2004

No 3 "The Nuclear Landscape in 2004: Past Present and Future" by John Simpson, June 2004

No 4 "Reviving the Non-Proliferation Regime" by Jonathan Dean, June 2004

No 5 "Article IV of the NPT: Background, Problems, Some Prospects" by Lawrence Scheinman, June 2004

No 6 "Nuclear-Weapon-Free Zones: Still a Useful Disarmament and Non-Proliferation Tool?" by Scott Parrish and Jean du Preez June 2004

No 7 "Making the Non-Proliferation Regime Universal" by Sverre Lodgaard, June 2004

No 8 "Practical Measures to Reduce the Risks Presented By Non-Strategic Nuclear Weapons" by William C. Potter and Nikolai Sokov, June 2004

No 9 "The Future of a Treaty Banning Fissile Material for Weapons Purposes: Is It Still Relevant?" by Jean du Preez, June 2004

No 10 "A Global Assessment of Nuclear Proliferation Threats" by Joseph Cirincione, June 2004

No 11 "Assessing Proposals on the International Nuclear Fuel Cycle" by Jon B. Wolfsthal, June 2004

No 12 "The New Proliferation Game" by William C Potter, June 2004

No 13 "Needed: a Comprehensive Framework for Eliminating WMD" by Michael Krepon, September 2004

No 14 "Managing the Biological Weapons Problem: From the Individual to the International" by Jez Littlewood, August 2004

No 15 "Coping with the Possibility of Terrorist Use of WMD" by Jonathan Dean, June 2004

No 16 "Comparison of States vs. Non-State Actors in the Development of a BTW Capability" by Åke Sellström and Anders Norqvist, October 2004

No 17 "Deconflating 'WMD'" by George Perkovich, October 2004

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