Preventing the use of Weapons of Mass Destruction

Editor

ERIC HERRING

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FRANK CASS
LONDON • PORTLAND, OR

First Published in 2000 in Great Britain by
FRANK CASS PUBLISHERS
2 Park Square, Milton Park,
Abingdon, Oxon, OX14 4RN

and in the United States of America by
FRANK CASS PUBLISHERS
270 Madison Ave,
New York NY 10016

Transferred to Digital Printing 2005

Website: www.frankcass.com

Copyright © 2000 Frank Cass Publishers

British Library Cataloguing in Publication Data

Preventing the use of weapons of mass destruction
1. Weapons of mass destruction 2. Security, International
I. Herring, Eric
327.1'74

ISBN 0-7146-5044-7 (cloth)
ISBN 0-7146-8097-4 (paper)

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Preventing the use of weapons of mass destruction / editor Eric Herring.
p. cm.
Includes bibliographical references and index.
ISBN 0-7146-5044-7 (cloth) – ISBN 0-7146-8097-4 (pbk.)
1. Weapons of mass destruction. 2. Nuclear arms control. I. Herring, Eric.

JZ5665 .P74 2000
327.1'747 – dc 21 00-031504

This group of studies first appeared in a Special Issue on
'Preventing the Use of Weapons of Mass Destruction'
of *The Journal of Strategic Studies* (ISSN 0140 2390) 23/1 (March 2000)
published by Frank Cass.

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1

Introduction

ERIC HERRING

The bulk of the literature on weapons of mass destruction (WMD) concentrates on preventing their spread. While that is an important subject, the aim of this collection is to contribute to the literature on preventing their use. A common argument runs through all of the contributions: that, while complacency must be avoided, much of the post-Cold War focus among Western governments on the threat posed by weapons of mass destruction (WMD) is excessively alarmist. Beyond this shared ground, the authors are diverse in their approaches and in many of their conclusions:

The first three authors provide critiques of Western, especially NATO and US, policy as in some ways having the unintended effect of increasing rather than reducing the chances of the use of WMD, especially nuclear weapons:

- In his assessment of US policy, James Wirtz argues that the Clinton administration has failed to face up to the potential for escalation to nuclear use by an opponent forced into a 'use it or lose it' situation should the United States use conventional forces to attempt to destroy its nuclear weapons. He is sufficiently concerned to want to call conventional counterforce to destroy nuclear weapons a form of nuclear war as a means of drawing attention to that escalation potential.
- NATO's twin track policy of support for non-proliferation regimes and nuclear deterrence as a means of preventing the use of WMD is analysed by Henning Riecke. He develops two competing hypotheses. The first is a neoliberal institutionalist one that these two approaches are compatible and contribute to reinforcing the norm of WMD non-use. The second is a social constructivist one that the two tracks send rather mixed signals,

and thus are not very effective in reinforcing the norm of WMD non-use. Riecke sides with the social constructivist hypothesis. On the one hand, NATO's support for anti-proliferation regimes send out a signal suggesting the norm of delegitimisation of WMD use. On the other hand, NATO's military policies which include plans for the use of nuclear use in a variety of circumstances imply the legitimacy, and military and diplomatic utility, of nuclear weapons. Furthermore, Riecke sees no evidence of a shift towards a norm of WMD non-use in several countries in NATO's vicinity such as Iraq, Iran, Libya and Israel.

- Focusing specifically on Iran and Iraq, Carolyn James considers the implications should they acquire 'mini-arsenals', namely, nuclear arsenals big enough to inflict a great deal of damage but too small to ensure the destruction of the opponent's state or society. She sees mini-arsenals as being associated with the following hierachy of preferences: unilateral use without nuclear retaliation from the enemy, then mutual nuclear use, then mutual nuclear restraint and then unilateral use by the enemy without nuclear response. In contrast, she sees Mutually Assured Destruction (MAD) as associated with a less dangerous hierarchy of preferences: mutual nuclear restraint, then unilateral use without nuclear retaliation from the enemy, then unilateral use by the enemy without nuclear response and then mutual nuclear use. Instead, of hyping the threat posed by Iran and Iraq by labelling them 'rogue states', she argues that the West should treat them as rational actors. A controversial option she considers is that, if they acquire nuclear weapons, the West should assist them to move beyond the mini-arsenal stage as quickly as possible to reach a capability for MAD. However, she prefers to advocate conventional strength, regional alliances and alternate energy options as policies aimed at reordering their preferences to safer ones.

The next three authors address themselves to the various contexts which may influence the use of WMD:

- The cultural context is the concern of Beatrice Heuser, who considers principally Britain, France and the Federal Republic of Germany, but also touches on a wide range of other countries. Her aim is to assess the beliefs decision-makers have had about why nuclear weapons in particular are worth acquiring, about the nature of the world, about their own identity and about the identity of potential enemies. Through this approach, she argues, one can gain some insights into their propensity to actually launch a nuclear attack. She shows that nuclear weapons have

use value beyond launching attacks - they also have mythic, symbolic and status value. Heuser spells out the similarities and differences between various countries considered. She argues that many countries are culturally predisposed to avoiding the use of nuclear weapons as an instrument of war, but cautions that even they may nevertheless find that predisposition to be altered by circumstance.

- The systemic context is scrutinised by Yannis Stivachtis for its possible impact on the probability of nuclear use. He offers an analysis of the post-Cold War relationships between motives for acquiring WMD, deliberate and accidental use, the power structure of the international system, the decline of ideological competition between major powers, increasing interdependence and globalisation, and the development of international rules and norms, especially the norm of WMD non-use. He concludes that, taking into account these conditions, nuclear use ranges from least to most likely as follows: between major powers; between major and minor powers; and between minor powers. He also argues that the more powers are entangled in interdependence and globalisation processes, the less likely WMD use becomes.

- The technological context in the form of an information-based Revolution in Military Affairs (RMA) involving a shift from mass destruction to precision disruption is considered by Patrick Morgan. He argues that we do appear to be heading for an RMA, even if seen restrictively as involving a combination of new technology, new social and organizational systems, and new conceptions (which actually reshape practice) of how to use force and threats effectively for political purposes. He considers the possible impact of the information RMA on the previous RMA brought about by the development of nuclear weapons deployed on long-range delivery systems: it may supersede, stimulate, deter, pre-empt or become a new version of the use of WMD. Morgan concludes that, on balance, the information RMA will make the use of WMD less likely, although it cannot guarantee that WMD will not be used and is a long way off eliminating the desire to acquire or maintain WMD.

The last two authors challenge widely-held assumptions among many of those worried about the threats posed by WMD:

- The labelling of chemical and biological weapons and related delivery systems as WMD is seen by John Mueller and Karl Mueller as

something to be avoided because it is very difficult to actually inflict mass destruction with them. They prefer to restrict the label WMD to nuclear weapons and point out that little attention is paid to the mass destruction inflicted by economic sanctions. When economic sanctions do inflict mass destruction, they prefer the term 'economic warfare'. They argue that Western decision-makers are excessively worried about the threat posed by terrorists and rogue states, and that this is true even of fears about the dangers of such actors acquiring a small nuclear arsenal. Western decision-makers, they maintain, should rely on low-key measures to control the scale of terrorism and on deterrence and containment rather than economic warfare to deal with rogue states. They also argue that the limited threat posed by terrorists and rogue states has declined considerably with the end of the Cold War because they have lost their principal backer, the Soviet Union.

- The labelling of some states as 'rogue states', supposedly the most worrying kind of state when it comes to the potential for WMD use, is assessed sceptically by Eric Herring. He critiques three social science perspectives on the label 'rogue state': it is appropriate for the very serious threats to the West which exist (the conservative perspective); it exaggerates the threats to the West from certain states (the liberal perspective); and it exaggerates the threats to the West and is applicable also or even primarily to the United States and some of its allies (the perspective of the left). He points out that those writing from the conservative and liberal perspectives simply ignore the left. Ironically, he finds the left's position to be the most persuasive of the three. The also argues that one's position on this issue is driven less by the facts than by one's own values and identity underlying one's construction and interpretation of the facts (the interpretivist perspective). He concludes by proposing the development of 'radical security studies', not only as an approach to the issue of rogue states but also as an approach to the study of security generally. Radical security studies aims to engage seriously with the left as well as more mainstream perspectives, while trying to integrate social science and intepretivism.