Weapons of Mass Destruction: Rhetoric and Realities

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Whether or not the elimination of weapons of mass destruction from much of the world (WMD) eventually proves practicable, it is surely necessary to reduce if not eliminate the current flow of loose, emotive, and sometimes extravagant language about them. Such rhetoric, whether from political, official, or media sources, not only misleads and may alarm public opinion but could also lead to clumsy and even dangerous thinking in the policy-making process itself.

Far too much recent talk has obscured the fact that WMD can vary hugely in nature, size, reliability, delivery systems, practical military usefulness, and destructiveness. They are not the same in either the scale or the nature of their impacts. Nor are their effects on individuals always or necessarily more atrocious than those of so-called conventional weapons. However dreadful the hostage deaths in the Moscow theatre from BZ gas (if such it was) were, they were not obviously more horrific than a fiery death from napalm or through multiple lacerations from anti-personnel mines or carpet-bombing.

This paper seeks to explore some of the misleading statements being employed about WMD in relation to Iraq in particular and, to a lesser extent, to other so-called "terrorist states," named by Defense Secretary Rumsfeld as including Iran, Libya, North Korea, and Syria. Whatever eventually happens in Iraq or elsewhere in the "war on terrorism" (which is really a necessary international campaign rather than a "war"), the need for careful distinctions and cool reasoning about WMD will clearly remain crucial to the framing of foreign and defense policy.

To criticize loose talk about WMD is not to underestimate either their destructiveness or the waves of disproportionate public terror they can inflict. The latter is, after all, the first aim of a terrorist campaign. Nor does such criticism neglect the genuine difficulties facing democratic politicians in getting complex messages across to an often complacent or skeptical electorate. But extravagance may well magnify skepticism, whereas precision should help to keep threats from both WMD and conventional weapons in rational perspective, along with the full range of possible responses.

A degree of care about language—and logic—is especially necessary amidst the understandably inflamed emotions and rampant suspicions that followed the atrocities of 9/11, Bali, Moscow, and Mombasa. Anger, fear, and horror at the very

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idea of chemical, biological, or nuclear attack all too readily feed blind hatred and foster appetites for possibly unthinking responses.

It cannot be simply assumed, as some argue, that Saddam Hussein has collaborated with Al–Qaeda or any other terrorist group. No clear evidence of it has yet been produced. Few, however, would deny that Iraq's ruler has constantly breached international law, lied about his weapons, and behaved outrageously. This paper, however, does not seek to make any particular argument about Saddam's present armory, his intentions, or the various short- or long-term dangers he may represent. Its primary purpose is to help clarify some issues about WMD that are far too important to blur, both now and in the future. Misleading statements or insinuations about them have become far too common, especially in the Iraqi context.

WMD as a single category?

Some commentators speak as if the different kinds of WMD are essentially the same. All three kinds are of course morally loathsome, deeply shocking, and could, in certain conditions, cause horrendous death tolls. Nevertheless, generalizations can obscure significant differences. All three kinds of so-called WMD can be small or large in impact. They can be sophisticated or primitive, well- or badly-guided. Some are extremely expensive, others relatively cheap. The manufacture of nuclear weapons requires rather conspicuous installations and masses of water or electricity or both. Some biological weapons, on the other hand, can be produced in a back street brewery, some chemical ones in a paint factory.

In terms of the number of potential casualties, nuclear weapons can be of a quite different magnitude and strategic potential than either chemical or biological weapons. These last two types are primarily designed for tactical or theatre use, as on the battlefield (although the USSR did put biological agents on a number of strategic missiles as a follow-up to a nuclear strike). Biological weapons could potentially kill huge numbers if used to precipitate an epidemic. However, a smallpox epidemic, for example, could make military occupation of the area very difficult and could also spread into friendly countries.

"Mass Destruction"

This phrase is at once ominous and vague. It may be slight comfort, but chemical and biological weapons kill beings and do not destroy things. Only nuclear weapons can destroy both. Neither chemical nor biological weapons will destroy streets, buildings, electrical grids, or military or other hardware. Both have impacts that are difficult to control or predict. For a start, weather is involved.

People tend to forget that conventional weapons can destroy wide areas, whole cities, and kill huge numbers in the process. Showers of explosive and incendiary bombs caused over 200,000 deaths at Dresden in World War Two. Bullets and shells killed 57,000 Allied soldiers on the Somme in a few hours. In 1994, at least

800,000 people in Rwanda were killed mostly by machete in just 100 days (this has been called the most "efficient" mass killing since Hiroshima and Nagasaki).

Perhaps we should adopt a less misleading terminology than "weapons of mass destruction." Nuclear, biological, and chemical weapons (NBC) would be a more accurate term (although I will stick to WMD in this paper). All three types of weapon still remain horrible, inhumane, mostly indiscriminate, and potentially cataclysmic. They deservedly are the outstanding candidates for a big push—by the U.S. and U.K., among others—for worldwide arms control and eventual abolition. But there are conventional candidates too, such as the anti-personnel land-mines that litter many regions and still mutilate thousands every year.

Weapons or Devices

Crude terrorist devices, or "dirty bombs" as they are sometimes called, can employ a biological or chemical agent or radioactive dust to lethal effect. They should not, however, be confused with weapons, which are designed to maximize accuracy, range, and effective destructiveness, and so demand a quite different degree of respect.

The sort of device that spread Sarin gas in part of the Tokyo subway system (or could have dispensed cyanide in London's) was not a weapon of mass destruction in any meaningful sense. Such devices might kill tens or hundreds at a time, but so can a major air or rail accident. They are unlikely to kill tens of thousands. "Dirty bombs" can certainly be effective as instruments of terror but will be less so if we do not conflate them with WMD.

Delivery Systems

Some people say or imply that Iraq's possible, probable, or actual possession of some WMD (or NBC weapons) in itself constitutes a serious threat. This is a grotesque oversimplification. Saddam has certainly produced them, hidden them, and lied about them in the past, and could have done so again. But possession is not enough; any would-be aggressor also needs a delivery system capable of effectively delivering to a relevant and valuable target the nuclear warhead or biological or chemical agent in question. Iraq could reach Israel with its few remaining Scud missiles and bombers (and probably reap fearful revenge). But it could only deploy NBC weapons against the United States or Western Europe if it could do so with such means as commercial aircraft or shipping or, in the case of some terrorist devices, a suitcase or package.

National Interest

Nor is possession combined with an effective delivery system necessarily sufficient to constitute a threat. To launch any WMD-based attack on a much stronger military power, or on one of that power's allied or client states, the would-be aggressor would also need a profound incentive, since the invited response could

plainly prove catastrophic. What would be the point? This is a fundamental question in this context.

This need not apply if the potential antagonist were truly mad, but all the alleged "terrorist states," not least Iraq, appear to be ruled by determined—and, so far, notably successful—survivors. The situation would be totally different if the antagonist—say, Saddam—were to be pre-emptively assaulted, but all his retaliatory capabilities were not immediately destroyed. He could then decide he had nothing to lose with a last defiant (if probably suicidal) assault. (This is one of several reasons why deterrence and containment rather than pre-emption have for so long been the governing features of U.S., and NATO, defense policy.)

Middle East Stability

It is commonly claimed that Saddam's WMD, if shown to exist, threaten Middle Eastern stability. They could certainly do so if he attacked Israel or any other country in the region. But he has shown no sign since his invasion of Kuwait of daring to launch any such attack. He appears to have been effectively contained for over a decade. Arguably the more profound threats to Middle Eastern stability would come precisely from a Western, or Israeli, attack on Iraq, or on any other Muslim country, including Iran.

World Peace

Both President Bush and Mr. Blair have said that Saddam's weapons also threaten world peace. Other Western leaders have talked of them threatening the Western way of life or terrorizing the free world. No plausible scenarios have been offered to substantiate these monumental claims. Indeed, their extravagance may reinforce suspicions that some actors are determined to replace Saddam whatever he does about his WMD, and that other motives—oil for example—may be playing an unacknowledged role.

Tyrannies and Democracies

It is commonly implied that a tyrant's possession of WMD is automatically more dangerous than a democracy's. This must at first sound right, yet it obscures the fact that it is the *use* of WMD that is especially perilous. Take the case of Israel. It has over 200 nuclear weapons, sophisticated delivery systems, and is not subject to U.N. inspection due to its refusal to sign the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty. Israel has explicitly threatened unrestrained response to any form of Iraqi attack. The regional and wider consequences of Israel, an American ally, using WMD against any Muslim country would be at least as serious as Iraqi use of its certainly far more limited WMD capability.

Needless to say, any use at all of nuclear weapons in particular would breach a vital worldwide threshold that has been anxiously sustained ever since 1945 and remains of incalculable value.

"Proved willing"?

U.S. and U.K. leaders often allege that Saddam has "proved" he is willing to use WMD because he did so on Iranian troops and his own Kurdish citizens. Saddam is plainly wholly lacking in scruple, but neither episode can possibly prove that he would dare to use any WMD on states that could readily and overwhelmingly retaliate. (Nor does a use of chemical weapons prove a readiness to use other categories of WMD, such as nuclear weapons, especially against a big military power as opposed to a defenseless Iraqi town.)

Disarmament and Regime Change

Mr. Blair has said that Saddam's power in Iraq is based on his possession of WMD. This is surely not so. It is the consequence of his ruthless suppression of dissent, for which WMD are not necessary. The chemical weapons he used against the Kurds could equally well have been bullets, bombs, or bayonets.

U.K. sources often, and U.S. sources sometimes, suggest that depriving Saddam of WMD would of itself result in a regime change. If this means that he would then automatically fall, it is very hard to see why he should. His personal prestige would no doubt suffer, but not his internal rule: his secret police and security forces would surely remain dominant.

Alternatively, it could be meant that if Saddam were demonstrably deprived of WMD he could be regarded in effect as a sufficiently changed man. This would be unbelievably naive; the tyranny and torture would continue. The man is incorrigible. The more important question is whether Saddam could not then be regarded as a great deal less dangerous. After all, there are lots of torturers in this world.

Be that as it may, on October 21, President Bush himself said that "If he (Saddam) were to meet all the conditions of the United Nations, that in itself would signal the regime has changed." As a sign of flexibility this was widely welcomed. It could also perhaps provide something of a political escape route for Mr. Bush if the WMD issue was dealt with but Saddam remained in power.

Plans to Use WMD?

Mr. Blair has said that Saddam "has plans to use" his WMD. Any government acquiring WMD is likely to have decided, however questionably, that they are necessary as a deterrent to other WMD powers. In the same context they will of course have decided in what circumstances it might use them. The U.K., like all other possessors, will have done so. This does not mean that the U.K. or anyone else has "plans to use them" in the menacing sense that the Prime Minister appeared to imply.

Saddam and the Terrorists

Saddam is often alleged to be working hand in glove with terrorists and might therefore use them to convey WMD. No convincing evidence has yet been given of

Iraqi cooperation with terrorists. Osama bin Laden (whose links with other Saudis are conspicuous) regards Iraq's secular Ba'athist regime with contempt. Saddam, who is no Islamist, could well regard such groups with intense suspicion—as does President Qaddafi. Terrorists are not in any case likely to prove dependable allies (as Washington discovered in the Soviet-Afghan war).

How Serious a Threat?

Washington has vividly said what many contend: that to wait for the first mushroom cloud would be foolish. This sounds robustly realistic but considerably oversimplifies matters. For a start, such a proposition could argue for a pre-emptive assault on any allegedly hostile state that could have acquired nuclear weapons, including Mr. Rumsfeld's list of Libya, Syria, Iran, and North Korea (which has possibly already done so). Quite horrific scenarios could arise of several—possibly successive—wars with awesome consequences, not least for relations between the major powers. The proposition could also seem to justify, for example, a pre-emptive attack across the India-Pakistan border.

On the other hand, international law rightly allows for self-defense, including the use of pre-emptive assault where the threat is clear and present, rather than speculative and distant. Plainly the equations of choice are highly complex at the legal as well as political and military levels.

So far as Saddam's nuclear potential is concerned, the IISS "Net Assessment" concluded that if Iraq were able to acquire sufficient fissile material from foreign sources, it could probably produce some nuclear weapons in short order, perhaps in a matter of months.

Iraq could well have retained or recently acquired some biological and chemical weapon capabilities. It is, however, unlikely that it has either effective delivery systems or, short of being attacked first, a military motive to use any of them, especially if up against a stronger adversary like the U.S. or U.K. It is relevant here that the Ministry of Defence said in February 2001 (*The Future Strategic Context for Defence*) that, "At present the U.K. remains out of range of missiles and aircraft from proliferating states." The same would plainly be even more true for the U.S.

There must of course be some real danger to Western Europe and the U.S.— and to others as well—of chemical, biological, or radioactive devices being smuggled in by commercial air or sea transport. Even crude ones could kill hundreds, possibly a few thousands. They could be deployed by either a terrorist group or by a particular sovereign state. Whether in this latter case any given attack would be thought to justify an immediate resort to full scale war would—or should— depend on highly complex calculations of likely military, international, and security repercussions.

Following the passage of the Security Council's Resolution 1441 in November 2002, a disarming attack on Iraq could be legally and politically justified if Iraq

had clearly failed adequately to declare or consent to the destruction of its WMD, ballistic missiles, and other defined equipment. The Security Council could then agree that there was no alternative to war. A consensus of this kind, preferably via a second explicit resolution, would certainly serve to restore at least some of the U.N.'s authority and would bolster the otherwise weakened post-war consensus on multilateral cooperation in the quest for world order.

Zero Tolerance and Material Breach

Of key importance to the Security Council's final conclusion about an attack on Saddam must be the issue of what would constitute a "material breach" of Iraq's obligations under the terms of the same resolution. Legitimate concern over its possible holdings of WMD and related delivery systems should plainly not be extended to extraneous issues, such as Iraqi anti-aircraft fire against allied aircraft in the no-fly zones, petty obstruction of the U.N. inspectors, or minor inaccuracies in Iraq's declarations on, say, a small anthrax deposit. None of these offenses by themselves could justify a war. Mr. Blair has himself rightly stressed that the breach must be serious.

Special wariness may be called for toward statements like Mr. Rumsfeld's in September that "the most intrusive inspection regime would have difficulty getting at all his WMD." While literally true, this could seem to imply that only a small residue, a suspicion of one, or even a negative result, could warrant war. When the long Iraqi declaration on its capabilities was delivered on December 7, President Bush said immediately that it must be credible. Indeed. But credible to whom? (Or to how many Security Council members?) To those who reject its evidence before attempts are made to remedy any deficiencies?

None of this, however, questions the clear need to present Saddam with many justifiably tough demands together with a convincing show of force.

WMD, Saddam, and "Absolute Evil"

President Bush and Mr. Blair, among others, frequently describe Saddam as evil. Mr. Straw has called Saddam's regime "the wickedest in history." Saddam is transparently a persistent liar, a cynical operator, and a cruel despot who tyrannizes his own nationals and could certainly be dangerous to his neighbors (and to Israel) if he were not to remain strictly contained.

Nevertheless, none of these charges justify the use of demonizing language about "evil." This suspiciously absolute concept can spawn excessive public fear, an undeserved hatred for an innocent people, and an appetite for murderous revenge. It can also sometimes, as with Nasser in 1956, prove self-defeating, not least by promoting the image of an anti-Western "hero" or martyr. The addition of WMD, alleged "terrorist links," and torture to the almost satanic amalgam creates a Manichean good/bad division of the world ("for us or against us") that amplifies

the intensity of condemnation and the desire for unrestrained, perhaps eventually nuclear, attack.

Not least significant, the language of evil—also promiscuously used by Saddam and bin Laden—closes minds to options other than pure military force. It seems to dismiss outright any discussion of such alternative pressures, sanctions, delays, briberies, and persuasions, not excluding subversive and special military operations that, if guided by high-grade intelligence, could often constitute more effective courses of action. Demonizing language, by contrast, can foster a quasi-religious resort to what could escalate into apocalyptic destruction.

Either/Or

Mr. Blair frequently says the U.N. "must do something" about Saddam's WMD, as if the only available alternative to instant disarmament is more or less instant attack. Why this is so now but has not been so for years past has remained obscure. What urgency is there now that did not exist two or three years ago? Is there really no conceivable third way?

The Wider Proliferation of WMD

An understandable concern with Iraq's capabilities should not obscure the world-wide cause of restraining the development and spread of these weapons. International efforts to achieve monitored restraint and effective reductions are bound to suffer in the presence of unilateral departures from past treaties and the frustration of nascent arms control measures such as the Protocol to the Biological and Toxin Weapons Convention, which the U.S. helped to scuttle last year. Refusals of otherwise agreed inspection systems by any of the powers are also regrettable, including the U.S. demand to be allowed to veto international examination of its own chemical plants, despite being a party to the Chemical Weapons Convention.

Any attempt by any government to devise or test new nuclear weapons for deep penetration or any other purpose will also hardly help the cause of arms control. Multilateralism is the key to all these efforts; there can be no legitimate exemptions for any state, perhaps especially the powerful. In the crucial long-term struggle for hearts and minds the charge of hypocrisy can be extremely damaging. The same rules must apply to all.

Mass Destruction: Active and Passive

Most public discussion about threats to Western societies from WMD or terrorism (or both combined) obscures embarrassing but necessary questions about Western toleration of totally unacceptable death tolls elsewhere in the world from less dramatic causes.

The deliberate massacre of innocent civilians as on 9/11 justifies a special sort of horror and anger, but we all share, and must take some responsibility for, a global system in which preventable diseases kill well over two million children

a year, primarily due to poverty. Well over a billion people lack clean drinking water, a major contributor to infection. Meanwhile, about three hundred thousand Americans alone are said to die annually from obesity. Comfortable Westerners show much more indignation at deaths by commission than omission, by others' aggression rather than their own neglect. Perhaps some reevaluation of our ethical standpoints and emotional responses is called for.

Living with WMD, Terrorism, and Rogue States

Following 9/11, the world is now widely recognized to be complex, tough, deeply divided, instantly televised, and emotionally labile. It is one in which the more unpopular Western powers must expect to remain acutely vulnerable to unorthodox attacks. Until there are profound changes in some regional, indeed global, conditions, many countries are likely to suffer attacks with terror-inducing devices, if not weapons, some of them employing biological, chemical, or radioactive materials. On occasion, an identifiable sovereign state may be involved.

In situations demanding them, all necessary military and other capabilities for deterrence, defense, or attack must plainly be employed. An attack to disarm Saddam, with U.N. assent, could prove to be one of these. Sometimes, however, it may be counter-productive to resort to outright war rather than the more selective actions for containment that might limit the mayhem.

The political difficulties of such apparent restraint are obvious. Yet counter actions can be severe without being obliterative, and can be all the more effective if plainly accompanied by serious—and necessarily costly—long-term efforts to win hearts and minds.

The essential remedy to the world's vulnerability to terrorism and rogue states must surely lie not merely in strongly curbing terrorist groups and their supporters but by radically changing Western (as well as local) policies in the Third World, especially in the Middle East. Such policies would strongly support democratic instead of despotic regimes, strenuously uphold international law, and provide generous support and hence hope to the deprived, the confused, and the desperate. There are better justifications for such policies than reducing the supply of suicide bombers, but that reason alone could suffice.

Meanwhile, coarse warnings about WMD allied with sometimes blatantly inflammatory language about tyranny, terrorism, and torture could encourage false hopes that simple amputation will serve where more precise if still severe treatments would be more constructive. President Bush has called Saddam a homicidal dictator who is addicted to weapons of mass destruction. Perhaps the suggested obsession with them is becoming contagious. We should beware of making impossible demands that the miscreant report every last detail (on very few pages), make no mistakes, confess every deception, and destroy every last vial.

Bad things can be made worse, but they can also be survived and even built upon. Although each case is very different, we might recall that over three thou-

sand died during the Irish troubles, and great cities were scarred, yet a peace process has finally proved possible. So it has, even more remarkably, in Sri Lanka despite 60,000 deaths in 18 years. Intemperate rhetoric about WMD inhibits objective thinking about the short- and long-term costs of reflexive responses. In any event, our public utterances and policy discussions should clarify, not betray, the factual realities and the various options for our decisions.