

# CAPITAL COMMENTARY

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## Now, Only Preemption is Containment

From the end of WW II until September 11, 2001, the National Security Strategy (NSS) of the United States was based on the assumption that other “great powers” posed the only real threat to its security. During the Cold War, that meant primarily the Soviet Union. But even during the 1990s, our main worry was potential “regional hegemony” or “near-peer competitors.” Our goal was to contain and deter such threatening states.

September 11th shattered the assumption that only advanced states could threaten the U.S. If we could suffer such massive carnage from terrorists using commercial airliners, imagine the destruction we would suffer if terrorists had access to weapons of mass destruction! The specter of WMD in the hands not only of states but also of radical suicidal terrorists has driven some strategists to believe that the traditional Cold War and post-Cold War strategies of containment and deterrence require radical revision.

The serious debate over Iraq is largely between those who still cling to containment and deterrence in the post-post-Cold War world after September 11th and those who advocate a major change. The defenders of the new strategy are sure that only a more aggressive policy that includes the option of *military preemption* can forestall a future terrorist attack on the U.S. with weapons of mass destruction.

Iraq is a crucial test case for the debate. Remember that since the end of the Gulf War, the “containment” policy of both the U.S. and the U.N. has insisted that Iraq not only be deterred from the *use* of WMD but even from the *possession* of them. In 1998, President Clinton vowed that Iraq must honor its commitment to the UN to give up its WMD. He retreated from those vows. President Bush has not.

Some critics of the Bush Administration's new NSS counsel a return to the Cold War containment policy. They emphasize deterring the *use* of WMD

but are not so worried about the *acquisition* of WMD. They are willing to bet on the “unlikelihood” that terrorists would ever acquire WMD from Iraq. After all, Iraq is “secular,” Al Qaeda is “religious.” Besides, they think the threat of a massive U.S. nuclear retaliation deters the use of WMD against Israel, other allies, and U.S. forces in the region. Those of us who advocate preemption think this is a bad bet and believe that preemption with conventional forces is morally preferable to threatening massive destruction using our own WMD against innocent civilians in Baghdad.

Critics of using military force against Iraq say we should “let the inspections work.” Yet as even Kofi Annan and Hans Blix have admitted, the U.N. inspectors have been able to return to Iraq only because of the U.S. military buildup and the very real threat of preemptive American-led military action. It appears that, in our new circumstances, genuine containment is only possible if preemptive military action is a genuine possibility. But morally speaking, to will the end—the disarmament and containment of Iraq—is to will the means—the threat of preemptive military force, unilaterally if necessary.

Saddam knows from experience that the will of the so-called “international community” to sustain containment will erode over time into appeasement. Thus his entirely predictable strategy of lies and delay, making only minimal concessions until the world returns to business as usual. The likely consequences of such appeasement are too horrific to contemplate. Other rogue states will take note and be encouraged to join the WMD league, increasing the likelihood of terrorist groups acquiring them. And using them.

Permitting any part of this scenario can't be the moral course of action.

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