The Necessity of Preemptive Military Action

EWS 2005

Subject Area National Military Strategy

The Necessity of Preemptive Military Action

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To

Major DJ Verda, CG 6

March 2005

Report Documentation Page

Form Approved
OMB No. 0704-0188

1. REPORT DATE	2. REPORT TYPE	3. DATES COVERED
MAR 2005		**00-00-2005 to 00-00-2005**

4. TITLE AND SUBTITLE	5a. CONTRACT NUMBER
The Necessity of Preemptive Military Action	5b. GRANT NUMBER
	5c. PROGRAM ELEMENT NUMBER
6. AUTHOR(S)	5d. PROJECT NUMBER
	5e. TASK NUMBER
	5f. WORK UNIT NUMBER
7. PERFORMING ORGANIZATION NAME(S) AND ADDRESS(ES) **United States Marine Corps Command and Staff College,Marine Corps University,2076 South Street, Marine Corps Combat Development Command,Quantico,VA,22134-5068**	8. PERFORMING ORGANIZATION REPORT NUMBER
9. SPONSORING/MONITORING AGENCY NAME(S) AND ADDRESS(ES)	10. SPONSOR/MONITOR'S ACRONYM(S)
	11. SPONSOR/MONITOR'S REPORT NUMBER(S)

12. DISTRIBUTION/AVAILABILITY STATEMENT
Approved for public release; distribution unlimited

13. SUPPLEMENTARY NOTES

14. ABSTRACT

15. SUBJECT TERMS

16. SECURITY CLASSIFICATION OF:			17. LIMITATION OF ABSTRACT	18. NUMBER OF PAGES	19a. NAME OF RESPONSIBLE PERSON
a. REPORT **unclassified**	b. ABSTRACT **unclassified**	c. THIS PAGE **unclassified**	**Same as Report (SAR)**	**9**	

Preemption is defined as: “to seize before anyone else can, excluding others; appropriate.”[1] Preemptive military action deals with stopping an imminent enemy attack. The idea of preempting an attack on U.S. citizens or interests is a logical concept, yet when President George W. Bush first discussed the need for preemptive action in a speech at West Point on June of 2002 the idea has been controversial and has since been known as the Bush Doctrine.

Preemptive action is more than military strikes. It also includes financial and diplomatic measures. One possible financial action includes freezing the economic assets of known terrorist organizations. Working with the United Nations to impose sanctions is one possible diplomatic measure. The bottom line is the need to take action before a threat can take action. Preemptive action is nothing more than taking the initiative, taking action rather than waiting for the enemy to strike.

The current terrorist threat in the Global War on Terrorism (GWOT) uses unrestricted or unconventional warfare to achieve their desired results of chaos and destruction against the U.S. Terrorists will use all available means, from the media to flying airplanes into buildings to realize their intentions; therefore a doctrine of Preemptive Military Action (PMA) is a necessary measure in the GWOT.

[1] Webster’s New World Dictionary, College ed., s.v. “Preemption”.

The current National Security Strategy (NSS) document clearly explains the necessity of preemption.

> "Legal scholars and international jurists often conditioned the legitimacy of preemption on the existence of an imminent threat—most often a visible mobilization of armies, navies, and air forces preparing to attack. We must adapt the concept of imminent threat to the capabilities and objectives of today's adversaries."[2]

The enemy will use every possible method to strike at the U.S. The use of unconventional attacks necessitates adapting a doctrine of PMA. The Quadrennial Defense Report of 2001 stipulates, "The U.S. must deter, preempt, and defend against aggression targeted at U.S. territory, sovereignty, domestic population, and critical infrastructure, as well as manage the consequences of such aggression and other domestic emergencies."[3]

One of the primary focuses of preemptive action is to prevent the use by terrorists and rogue states of weapons of mass destruction (WMD) against the U.S. WMD is nuclear, chemical and biological weapons, including low grade, and relatively inexpensive forms of nuclear weapons called dirty bombs.

Dirty bombs are also known as the poor man's nuclear bomb and can be fit into a suitcase size container. The threat to the

[2] The White House, *National Security Strategy of the United States* (Washington, D.C.: GPO, 2002), 19.
[3] U.S. Department of Defense, *Quadrennial Defense Report*, 2001 (Washington, D.C.: GPO, 2001), 77.

U.S. by WMD is significant. The possibility of WMD being smuggled into the U.S. or even manufactured in the U.S. and the ability of a single individual to cause a major catastrophe by employing it is very real. That is the primary reason why the U.S. government must do everything possible to prevent such an occurrence.

The secondary reason for a doctrine of preemptive military action is to protect U.S. interests abroad. The globalized world means that the U.S. has interests in a wide variety of economic, security, and diplomatic areas. The need to ensure the safety of those interest's means that the U.S. must be prepared to act protect them. If those interest's come under attack by terrorist organizations then the U.S. must be prepared to act militarily.

The use of unrestricted warfare by Islamic radicals against the U.S. has been underway for over two decades. Attacks by radicals demonstrate that small groups with relatively little money can drastically affect the most powerful nation on earth.

As stated in the National Security Strategy,

> "Shadowy networks of individuals can bring great chaos and suffering to our shores for less than it costs to purchase a single tank. Terrorists are organized to penetrate open societies and to turn the power of modern technologies against us".[4]

Despite all of our military and technological might, the enemy will adapt and find innovative ways to strike the U.S. Adaptation by the U.S. is key; the doctrine of preemption is a necessary step in that direction. The concept of self-defense is a primary theme in the Bush doctrine. In this case, "the best defense is a good offense". The ideas of "preventive action" and "retaliation" can also be applied to the Bush doctrine. The idea of retaliation applies in the sense that the U.S. has been under attack by terrorists now for many years. This has been clearly demonstrated by the bombing of the Marine barracks in Beirut, American embassy bombings in the Middle East and Africa, hijackings, hostage taking, and both attacks on the World Trade Center in New York. Preventive action deals with influencing or stopping a potential threat before it becomes substantial. Both of those ideas are tied to the doctrine of preemption.[5]

Anti-war lobbyists and various members within the United Nations (U.N.) propose that the current Bush doctrine of PMA will do more harm than good.

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[4] The White House, 3.
[5] G. Warren, *The Bush Doctrine* (Online: The American Thinker, 2005), 1.

One argument is that preemptive actions, especially militarily, will only assist in furthering the already growing anti-U.S. sentiment in the world. Out of this anti-U.S. sentiment comes further recruitment of radicals and further attacks on the U.S. PMA is, in many cases, conducted unilaterally. Unilateral actions by the U.S. will foster a perception of isolation with potentially negative impacts affecting international organizations such as the U.N. and North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO). The whole point of preemption is to stop the attack before it happens. The alternative to preemption is not acting. The NSS states, "In the new world we have entered, the only path to peace and security is the path of action."[6] By not pursuing threats in a preemptive way means waiting until it is to late to act. The bottom line is that the safety of the United States is paramount and everything that can be done to ensure that safety should be done.[7]

PMA should not conflict with the U.S. commitment to peace in the world. Moral considerations and the humane treatment of non-combatants must be of primary importance. Roman Catholic theology includes a "Just War Doctrine":

[6] The White House, 4.
[7] M. Bunn, *Preemptive Action: When, How, and to What Effect?* (New York: World Security Network, 2004).

> "The strict conditions for legitimate defense by military force require rigorous consideration. The gravity of such a decision makes it subject to rigorous conditions of moral legitimacy. At one and the same time:
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> - The damage inflicted by the aggressor on the nation or community of nations must be lasting, grave, and certain;
> - All other means of putting an end to it must have been shown to be impractical or ineffective;
> - There must be serious prospects of success;
> - The use of arms must not produce evils and disorders graver than the evil to be eliminated. The power of modern means of destruction weighs very heavily in evaluating this condition.
>
> These are the traditional elements enumerated in what is called the "just war" doctrine. The evaluation of these conditions for moral legitimacy belongs to the prudential judgment of those who have responsibility for the common good."[8]

The Just War Doctrine does not conflict with PMA, but it is a good guide to assist in making the difficult decision to use force.

The current world situation is uncertain. The U.S. is committed to the GWOT for an indefinite amount of time. The U.S. military is dealing with insurgency operations in Iraq, and is very concerned with potential nuclear and WMD threats from Iran and North Korea. No matter how bleak the times may seem the U.S. has a solemn responsibility to protect its citizens and interests at home and abroad. That responsibility can be achieved by adhering to the concept of preemption.

[8] The Untied States Catholic Conference, *Catechism of the Catholic Church* for the United States of America, 1994 (New York, Doubleday, 1994), 2309.

By seeking to spread democracy and ideas of freedom, the U.S. is promoting peace and preventing or preempting the breeding ground for terrorists and radicals. This will take many years to foster. The globalized world and porous international borders, while facilitating freedom, is allowing terrorists and radicals to import violence and strike unexpectedly. It is for this reason that the U.S. must maintain the initiative. Keeping the initiative will assist in giving the terrorists and radicals no respite. They will have no safe place to plan, acquire equipment and WMD, or to exchange money. It is also for this reason that Preemptive Military Action, as expressed in the Bush doctrine, is a viable and necessary measure to be utilized in the overall GWOT.

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