

Deterring America

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Deterring America: Rogue States and the Proliferation of Weapons of Mass Destruction. By Derek D. Smith. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006. 210 pp., \$75.00 cloth (ISBN: 0-521-86465-8), \$24.99 paper (ISBN: 0-521-68313-0).

Derek Smith's new book, *Deterring America: Rogue States and the Proliferation of Weapons of Mass Destruction*, is a very thoughtful and clear exposition of what is arguably the most serious security threat facing the United States in the early twenty-first century, namely, the proliferation of nuclear, biological, and chemical weapons to states and, worse still, terrorist groups that are hostile to US interests.

Smith begins his discussion with a thorough review of deterrence theory and the strengths and weaknesses of deterrence as a strategy for protecting US interests in the current security environment. He then turns to recent history—the conflicts in Iraq in 1990–1991 and 2003 and the simmering crisis with North Korea over the past decade-and-a-half—to illustrate deterrence in practice, concluding that deterrence, although not without some force, is too unreliable to remain the central pillar of US national security strategy. Smith turns finally to policy prescriptions, with his central recommendation being the adoption of an international quarantine against transfers of weapons of mass destruction.

With respect to deterrence, Smith argues that success against so-called rogue states will be difficult for the United States to achieve given the likely asymmetry of stakes in most regional conflicts, the risk acceptant behavior of some regional leaders, the cognitive biases that render cost–benefit assessments suspect, and the prospect of misperception and miscommunication between US and regional leaders. However, Smith does not entirely cast deterrence aside. There may be situations in which the balance of interests, resolve, and capability favors the United States. The challenge for US policy will be to determine when and where deterrence can be effective.

Although the United States, according to Smith, should place less emphasis on retaliatory deterrence, regional leaders are likely to place greater reliance on the explicit or implicit threat to use weapons of mass destruction to deter the United States from intervening in their affairs. Consequently, it is they who will have to wrestle with the inadequacies of deterrence as the central element of their security strategy. It is perhaps ironic that the United States is entering an era during which its main preoccupation may be with undermining the effectiveness of deterrence rather than strengthening it, as it was during the Cold War.

Smith's rendition of recent US conflicts with Iraq and North Korea makes very interesting reading and adds to the already considerable literature on the history of deterrence successes and failures. Not surprisingly, he finds evidence on both sides of the ledger. US deterrence and compellence threats did constrain Iraqi and North Korean behavior, and yet US threats to retaliate if Saddam Hussein set Kuwait oil fields on fire in 1991 clearly failed. Similarly, North Korean threats to devastate Seoul in the event of war constrained US options during the 1993–1994 crisis and continue to do so today as the North Korean nuclear arsenal

grows. As with all such historical analyses, however, Smith is aware that assessing the effectiveness of deterrence and compellence often involves counterfactual analysis and, hence, remains suggestive rather than definitive.

Having discussed and illustrated the weakness of deterrence, Smith turns to other approaches for dealing with the proliferation of weapons of mass destruction: export controls, national ballistic missile defense, passive defense, and counterforce attacks. This discussion is balanced, but not complete. Export controls are only one means for preventing these threats from emerging. Other diplomatic means include treaties (such as the Nuclear Nonproliferation Treaty), UN Security Council resolutions (such as UNSC Resolution 1540, prohibiting the transfer of capabilities related to weapons of mass destruction to nonstate actors, which Smith discusses briefly), and bilateral arrangements (such as the US–Russian cooperative threat reduction program). Although such diplomatic means are imperfect, they aim, as do export controls, at preventing the spread of weapons of mass destruction. Beyond diplomacy, “dissuasion,” as discussed in US National Security Strategy documents (namely, making the United States so strong militarily that opponents are dissuaded from competing against it), is another approach to discourage threats from emerging. In this case, the discussion would have to address the counterargument that strengthening US military capability can also stimulate spiraling arms races. Preventive war is another approach, which Smith does take up later in the book.

With respect to defenses, Smith focuses appropriately on the questions of technical feasibility and strategic utility, but he does so solely in relation to national ballistic missile defense. This approach is too limited. Systems designed to intercept shorter-range ballistic missiles (formerly called “theater” missile defense), air threats, and covert delivery across US borders also need to be addressed. In fact, Smith advocates universalizing interdiction as envisioned in the Proliferation Security Initiative, which is yet another form of defense against covert delivery via aircraft or ship. Having said this, the fundamental fact that nuclear and biological weapons favor the offense implies that almost all efforts at active defense will be technically challenging. As Smith notes, interdiction will require “extraordinary intelligence, timing, and coordination to be successful” (p. xx). Passive defenses may also play a role, especially with respect to biological threats, but again they are not perfect.

Preemptive counterforce attacks against an opponent’s production, storage, and delivery systems for weapons of mass destruction are also considered by Smith. But he dismisses them as impractical given the difficulty of identifying and destroying the relevant targets because many are co-located with urban populations, deeply buried, or mobile.

Preventive attacks against incipient threats, as opposed to preemptive attacks against imminent threats, raise serious legal and political issues. Smith does an excellent job of articulating both sides of this contentious debate. Proponents of preventive action argue that nuclear weapons in the hands of “rogue” states pose such a grave threat that the United States should not wait until the threat is imminent to act—especially given that deterrence, preemptive counterforce, and defenses may be ineffective. Opponents argue that preventive military action violates Article 51 of the United Nations Charter and is dangerous because it is subject to errors of judgment and possible abuse by states, who may use it to justify attacks against emerging opponents. If the 1981 Israeli attack on the Osiriq reactor in Iraq is the quintessential example of the effectiveness of preventive attacks, the 2003 Iraq war and the subsequent insurgency is the quintessential example of the political, economic, and human costs associated with preventive war. Given the difficulty of accurately assessing a state’s intentions with respect to possessing weapons of mass destruction, Smith ultimately concludes that preventive war should be avoided.

Smith's main policy prescription is a global "quarantine" on transfers of weapons of mass destruction. Such a quarantine can be justified legally, is already occurring to some extent under the Proliferation Security Initiative (albeit without UN sanction), and represents a middle ground between those who advocate preventive military action and those who claim that only preemptive military action can be justified. An international regime against trafficking in weapons of mass destruction, allowing interdiction in suspect cases, is a compelling idea. However, it has several shortcomings that are not addressed by Smith. First, interdiction does not address proliferation *per se*, but focuses on the transfer of the technologies. "Rogue" states may still acquire weapons of mass destruction indigenously. Second, Smith does not describe what activities related to weapons of mass destruction would be subject to interdiction. As discussed earlier in the book, export control is difficult because many items are "dual use" and, hence, have legitimate peaceful purposes. How are dual use items to be handled in this interdiction scheme? Finally, interdiction is not equally effective for all transfers of weapons of mass destruction. For example, interdiction of plutonium, and of fission weapons based on plutonium, may be effective, but it will be less effective against uranium weapons, and less effective still against biological weapons (unless one has very precise intelligence) because the latter have no detectable signature.

In summary, *Deterring America* is a serious inquiry into US national security strategy in an age when the proliferation of weapons of mass destruction poses the most serious threat to US, if not international, security. Smith's discussion of deterrence is well informed; his reference to history is illuminating; and his policy prescriptions have considerable merit. Moreover, Smith's treatment is refreshing. All too often, debates over US security policy become politicized, not only just in Washington, DC, but also in academia. Smith draws on an unusually broad range of literature—from academics to think-tank analysts on both sides of the various debates—to develop and buttress his ideas. Policymakers and scholars would do well to emulate his open-minded and nonideological inquiry.