

Strategic Insight

What's New in the New U.S. Strategy to Combat WMD?

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At first inspection, the Bush administration's new "National Strategy to Combat Weapons of Mass Destruction," released to the public on 11 December 2002 [\[1\]](#), reads like old wine in a new bottle—certainly not the "fundamental change from the past" claimed by its authors. The assertion that "weapons of mass destruction (WMD)—nuclear, biological, and chemical—in the possession of hostile states and terrorists represent one of the greatest security challenges facing the United States," has become one of the more common claims heard in Washington. But words are words and deeds are deeds, Bush administration officials keep telling us. Thus it is particularly surprising that the three pillars of the Bush strategy—counterproliferation to combat WMD use, enhanced nonproliferation to combat WMD proliferation, and consequence management to respond to WMD use—were central elements of the previous administration's policy on WMD. In fact, these policy components came together early in President Clinton's first term. On closer examination, however, there is much in the Bush strategy that truly is new, much that stands out as an improvement over previous U.S. approaches to WMD, and much that already is being implemented with some success.

Rethinking the WMD Threat

The U.S. government has been concerned about the proliferation and use of WMD since chemical warfare agents were used against American troops in the First World War and U.S. adversaries started to develop biological warfare agents and nuclear weapons during and after the Second World War. While WMD were viewed during and immediately after the cold war as weapons of last resort, the Bush strategy correctly observes that WMD are now "militarily useful weapons of choice intended to overcome our nation's advantages in conventional forces and to deter us from responding to aggression against our friends and allies in regions of vital interest." "In addition," the new strategy asserts, "terrorist groups are seeking to acquire WMD with the stated purpose of killing large numbers of our people and those of our friends and allies—without compunction and without warning."

While these words could have been written by former Secretary of Defense William S. Cohen, who said that "our unrivaled supremacy in the conventional military arena is prompting adversaries to seek unconventional, asymmetric means to strike what they perceived as our Achilles heel," and that among our adversaries, we especially must be prepared to counter "fanatical terrorists" armed with WMD [\[2\]](#), there is a clear sense of urgency in the Bush administration's statements about WMD, which did not exist before 11 September 2001. Just as the American people viewed the Japanese threat in a new light after the attack on Pearl Harbor, so too does the public and its elected officials see a palpable change in the threat posed by state and non-state owners of WMD after last year's terrorist attacks against New York and Washington. As stated in this administration's National Security Strategy, released in September 2002, "the inability to deter a potential attacker, the immediacy of today's threats, and the magnitude of potential harm" all contribute to a clear and present danger.[\[3\]](#)

Of course, the urgency associated with today's WMD threat may result from more than just a changed national culture based on a heightened sense of vulnerability. The president's WMD strategy may be

motivated, at least in part, by new intelligence on deadly state and non-state WMD programs starting up, existing WMD programs reaching new technological or military milestones, and dangerous WMD transfers taking place by land, air, sea, and even by the internet. The 10 December interdiction of a North Korean ship laden with Scud missiles for Yemen, satellite imagery appearing the same week of new nuclear sites being constructed in Iran, recent revelations about North Korean advances in plutonium and enriched uranium production, and continued allegations about ongoing Iraqi WMD programs, all suggest that the WMD threat may be growing much faster than the public can see.

Counterproliferation

The first pillar of the new WMD strategy—counterproliferation to combat WMD use—had never before received presidential attention; but it is a policy that the Department of Defense (DoD) has been carrying out for over nine years. Counterproliferation refers to the full range of military preparations and activities to deter, defeat, and defend against the threat posed by WMD-armed adversaries. The three key elements of the Bush administration's counterproliferation strategy—deterrence, interdiction, and defense and mitigation—were top DoD priorities in the last administration, but they have a much different standing today.

The new U.S. deterrence posture against WMD use still rests on a strong declaratory policy and effective military forces, but there has been a not-so-subtle shift in the balance of deterrence from long-standing promises to *punish* any adversary that contemplated WMD use against U.S. interests, to increasingly credible threats to *deny* adversaries any meaningful political or military advantage from using WMD. The Bush administration remains adamant about the U.S. government's "right to respond with overwhelming force—including through resort to all of our options—to the use of WMD against the United States, its forces abroad, and friends and allies." In addition, the new strategy calls for improved military and civilian capabilities to defeat and defend against WMD use—including missile defenses and force enhancements such as intelligence, surveillance, interdiction, and even domestic law enforcement—which combine to strengthen deterrence by "devaluing an adversary's WMD and missiles."

Recognizing that deterrence may not succeed, and that WMD employment against the U.S. population or military forces could be devastating, the new strategy requires U.S. military forces and appropriate civilian agencies to be prepared to "detect and destroy an adversary's WMD assets before these weapons are used" and to have in place "robust active and passive defenses and mitigation measures" to enable U.S. authorities to accomplish their missions, and to assist friends and allies when WMD are used. Once again, this approach has much in common with previous U.S. policies, but the stress placed on missile defenses, and the unprecedented resources devoted to them, is a hallmark of the Bush administration's defense strategy. Also receiving new and appropriate emphasis is the development of specifically tailored policies to counter biological weapons, which, because of their unique detection and response requirements, cannot be lumped together with chemical weapons.

The most dramatic innovation in counterproliferation policy is the new stress on interdiction. The Bush administration is dead serious about enhancing "the capabilities of our military, intelligence, technical, and law enforcement communities to prevent the movement of WMD materials, technology, and expertise to hostile states and terrorist organizations." The recent seizure of a North Korean ship carrying Scud missiles bound for Yemen is evidence of this new approach. Because the missiles were going to a close ally in the war on terrorism, the shipment was allowed to sail on to Yemen, but the outcome would have been different had the ultimate recipient been a U.S. adversary, such as Iraq, or a stateless terrorist group, such as Al Qaeda. Of course, there is more to the new interdiction strategy than has been made public. U.S. intelligence agencies and military planners now have explicit guidance and top-level support to prevent WMD from moving to regions of vital interest.

Nonproliferation

The Bush administration's nonproliferation diplomacy has been the most widely challenged element of the new WMD strategy. Perhaps because of the stinging criticism the government has received for suspending multilateral negotiations on the compliance and transparency protocol of the thirty-year old Biological and Toxin Weapon convention, slashing funding for Cooperative Threat Reduction programs designed to reduce the danger of Soviet legacy WMD, and accepting India and Pakistan as nuclear weapon states despite their refusal to honor the Nuclear Nonproliferation Treaty (which they did not sign), the new WMD strategy promises to "actively employ diplomatic approaches in bilateral and multilateral settings in pursuit of our nonproliferation goals." Although the NGO community is skeptical of this claim, administration officials are counting on the enhanced counterproliferation and consequence management measures to provide an international environment more conducive to meaningful nonproliferation diplomacy than has been the case in recent years.

WMD Consequence Management

The third pillar of the new WMD strategy is a heightened readiness to respond to the consequences of WMD use against the American homeland or U.S. forces deployed abroad, and to assist friends and allies if they come under WMD attack. As with the other strategic pillars, this approach is familiar. President Clinton made homeland security a top priority of his second administration. But in the aftermath of the 11 September attacks, President Bush has gone several steps further. The new National Strategy for Homeland Security calls for greater preparedness to prevent, protect against, and respond to acts of terrorism on American soil [4], and the planned Department of Homeland Security will have unprecedented resources and responsibilities to mitigate the consequences of WMD use. Evidence that this policy is producing real change in the way we treat WMD risks at home is the government's recent directive to vaccinate civilian health care workers and military personnel against the infectious biological agent smallpox, and to make the vaccine available to the American public as early as next year.

A National Strategy: Long Overdue

While there are many truly new features in the government's new WMD policy, the most innovative aspect of the President's strategy on WMD is that it is a *Presidential strategy* on WMD. Whereas in previous administrations, the State Department pursued nonproliferation and the Defense Department pursued counterproliferation, and domestic authorities planned for homeland security, today these elements are woven together in a coherent White House strategy. "What's new here is that we have a comprehensive strategy," a senior administration official said during a White House background briefing. "Every administration comes under criticism for not having an integrated strategy on issues like this. We do." The impact of President's weight behind this strategy cannot be overestimated. Because there was no national strategy in the past, much-needed funds were not released to counterproliferation programs, intelligence agencies were not made to work together to anticipate WMD threats, military services were not forced to fully organize, train and equip to counter WMD use, and domestic agencies were not made aware of the imminence of WMD threats to the homeland. If backed by real resources and the President's full support, the new "National Strategy to Combat Weapons of Mass Destruction" will make us believe that NBC no longer stands for "no-body cares."

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References

1. [The National Strategy to Combat Weapons of Mass Destruction](#), December 2002.
2. William S. Cohen, "Message of the Secretary of Defense," in the Department of Defense, [Proliferation: Threat and Response](#), January 2001.

3. [The National Security Strategy of the United States of America](#), September 2002.
4. [The National Strategy for Homeland Security](#), July 2002.