

Responsibilities of Democracies in Preventing Deadly Conflict



By Graham Allison and Hisashi Owada, July 1999

Wars with Weapons of Mass Destruction

During the Cold War the challenge of preventing nuclear war was manifest most acutely in the rivalry between the United States and the Soviet Union. The danger of nuclear war was contained in several ways. First, deterrence worked. During much of the Cold War, a stable mutual deterrence relationship was widely (though not universally) regarded as one of the best safeguards against nuclear war. Second, arms control reduced risks of war by imposing restraints on forces and operations that managed the strategic balance and minimized the possibility of inadvertent or accidental nuclear war. Third, dialogue and détente dampened differences. In the Soviet-American context, the nuclear danger was to a large extent a function of relations between the two superpowers. Increasingly, meetings, summits, and regular communications tempered the Soviet-American relationship and contributed to a political environment in which the parties came to understand that they shared an interest in avoiding the major nuclear war of which they would be the first victims. The risk of misunderstanding and miscommunication was significantly reduced in comparison with the darkest Cold War years. Finally, promotion of norms and creation of regimes advanced the cause. During the Cold War, the threat of nuclear proliferation was addressed by trying to promote the norm of nonproliferation and by creating a treaty-based regime to help support that norm.

The first item on the current agenda for action should be massive cooperation on denuclearization with Russia and other states of the former Soviet Union to contain "loose nuclear weapons" and weapons-usable nuclear materials and to reduce the size of nuclear arsenals. Second, current nonproliferation regimes should be extended and strengthened, including reinforcement of the indefinite extension of the NPT, ratification of the Comprehensive Test Ban Treaty (CTBT), cessation of the production of fissile materials, support for the Wassenaar Arrangement (the international successor to the Coordinating Committee for Multilateral Export Controls [CoCOM]), strengthening of the Missile Technology Control Regime (MTCR), and enforcement of the Chemical Weapons Convention (CWC) and the Biological Weapons Convention (BWC). Third, intense diplomacy and coercion will be required to prevent additional countries from acquiring weapons of mass destruction, for example, Iran, Iraq, Libya, and North Korea.

In sum, what is required is a renewed, across-the-board effort to establish norms that push nuclear weapons off center stage and into the background so that they play no active role in international politics. Taboos and norms against biological and chemical weapons must be enhanced. The recent victory in establishing the CWC should give new impetus to efforts to outlaw possession of biological weapons as well.

Interstate Wars

During the five decades since World War II, the efforts to prevent interstate wars have been striking and successful. While there is no established set of categories of action for preventing deadly conflict, to suggest the array and extent of actions that have been taken, primarily by the major democracies, the following actions should be reviewed:

1. deterrence of aggressor states.
2. domestic political and economic reform of states.
3. arms control.
4. developing an open international economy.
5. strengthening international institutions promoting norms and cooperative security relations.
6. preventive diplomacy, mediation, and arbitration.

Intrastate Wars

What "normally" prevents intrastate deadly conflict? Either of two conditions: a functioning state or imposed order. The study of international relations defines a state as an entity that "exercises a monopoly of legitimate violence within its borders." Thus where states are functioning, they prevent internal conflict. In many instances, however, they do so in ways that violate the minimum standards of justice. Tibet is devoid of large-scale, organized deadly conflict, but devoid also of justice. Kosovo also had order without justice, until the outbreak of violence in March 1998, after which it has had neither.

Order imposed by an outside power is a second traditional means of preventing deadly conflict. Imposition of order by a colonial power, such as Belgium in Rwanda from 1916 to 1962, or by a central government on outlying states or provinces—such as Belgrade under Tito in Yugoslavia from 1945 to 1980 and the Soviet Union in Chechnya, Tajikistan, and Eastern Europe—has avoided war for long periods.

Graham Allison and Hisashi Owada wrote this discussion paper for a conference at the Carnegie Commission on Preventing Deadly Conflict in July 1999.