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IN MY VIEW

PREEMPTIVE OR PREVENTIVE?

Sir:

In “Two Hundred Years of Preemption” (*Naval War College Review*, Autumn 2007, pp. 15–28), George H. Quester provides a valuable review of the historical antecedents to the adoption by President George W. Bush of a “preemptive” war doctrine for America in 2002. Unfortunately, Dr. Quester’s implicit endorsement of that doctrine does not address some important gaps in contemporary discussions of the subject by pundits and the press.

The first gap is the failure to distinguish adequately between “preventive” and “preemptive” use of force. President Bush incorrectly labeled his doctrine “preemption,” which refers to using force when an attack is imminent. But when he acknowledged in his justification that the threats might only emerge years into the future, it was clear that he was advocating the “preventive” use of force. This distinction is more than semantic, since it provides a clear demarcation between what can and cannot be justified under international law.

A second gap is the lack of attention devoted to how the nuclear era changes the dynamics of preemptive and preventive attacks. Nuclear weapons pose an existential threat to even the most powerful of states. Nuclear-weapons states initially have an incentive to wage preventive war against adversaries who are beginning to develop nuclear arsenals. As nuclear-weapons states achieve the ability to annihilate each other within minutes of receiving warning of an attack, they begin to consider the need for preemptive options to avoid the full impact of a nuclear broadside. However, the development of a secure second-strike nuclear deterrent ultimately undermines the self-defense rationale for either preemptive or preventive attacks by the nuclear powers. The latter dynamics in our current post–Cold War era are considerably more relevant for the United States as sole remaining superpower in evaluating the political necessity or moral acceptability of preventive war doctrine than the differences Dr. Quester identifies between the views of the League of Nations and the United Nations at their respective foundings.
The third gap is relating preventive war doctrine to the potential nexus between proliferation and nonstate terrorist entities. While the potential danger of WMD in the hands of terrorists is more conspicuous since the 9/11 attacks, little rigor has been applied to the assumption that preventive war is the proper response. In fact, most would label the pursuit of al Qa’ida in Afghanistan, largely sanctioned by the international community in response to the 9/11 attacks, as an exercise of legitimate self-defense rather than preventive war. The invasion of Iraq in 2003 was a different matter. The Bush administration’s principal and most potent justification for attacking was that future Iraqi acquisition of nuclear weapons was both inevitable and unacceptable. Accordingly, it argued for preventive war to eliminate this future threat. But by insinuating that Iraq was connected to the 9/11 attacks, it not only blurred the identity of the attacker but conflated a hypothetical threat with an actualized one. When Dr. Quester asserts early in his article that “future American presidents will have to be willing to consider striking first to preempt an attack on American cities” (page 15), he risks blurring the differences between dealing with nations and with nonstate actors.

A full examination of the circumstances surrounding Britain’s bombardment of Copenhagen in 1807 may actually strengthen the case against resort to preventive war in our time. Britain had been convinced then that France would soon succeed in seizing the Danish fleet by force if London accepted Danish neutrality. As a consequence of the preventive attack Britain launched, the British seized the Danish fleet instead. Then as now, intelligence was imperfect. London may have placed excessive credence on reports that Denmark had secretly agreed to ally itself with France. Recent scholarship suggests that Britain may also have been duped by the French into believing that France was mobilizing to attack Ireland. These possibilities suggest that London may have had a less ignominious alternative—even within the bounds of nineteenth-century Realpolitik—than resort to a preventive attack against the civilian population of a neutral country. It is painful to imagine the psychological and human impact on Denmark of an event that proportionately killed far more inhabitants of Copenhagen than New York and Washington lost in the 9/11 attacks. But of course, Britain then was not the sole superpower, and it had no nuclear weapons to deter an invasion from the continent—only the superior power and ruthless application of the Royal Navy.

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