CHAPTER ONE

Introduction

Are weapons of mass destruction (WMD) a great equalizer that, even in small quantities, can deter the projection of U.S. power? The ongoing crises with both North Korea and Iran, not to mention the WMD issues surrounding the 2003 Iraq War, underline the importance of this quandary.

This book investigates the question of whether small WMD arsenals are stabilizing or destabilizing for world order. This question has been debated extensively in the field of political science, at least since publication of Kenneth Waltz's provocative Adelphi Paper in 1981, and with increasing vigor following the end of the Cold War.[1] Waltz's contention that small WMD arsenals are stabilizing has won wide adherence in the field.[2] This book represents the only systematic, comparative historical examination of preventive attack and weapons of mass destruction.[3] Relying on the new post–Cold War historiography, supplemented by field research in Russia, China, and Israel, my ambition is to present a comprehensive empirical survey of asymmetric WMD rivalry.[4] In addition to challenging Waltz and the so-called proliferation optimists, the results offer significant insights into the dynamics of conflict between the United States and small states that are armed or arming with WMD.

WMD AND THE WAR ON TERROR

Since the end of the Cold War, the proliferation of WMD has ranked at the top of the national security agenda. After the September 11 attacks, despite calls to reorient America's defense strategy toward threats posed by nonstate actors, the focus on state-sponsored WMD proliferation has been rigidly maintained. Given the tenuous connections linking the "axis

of evil" states to the September 11 attacks, this rigidity has struck many Americans as bizarre. But, as one commentator put it, the essential doctrine to emerge from President Bush's January 2002 State of the Union speech was that "the war on terrorism has now also become a war on [the spread of] weapons of mass destruction."[5]

Even before the recent intensification of crises with Iraq and North Korea, a new level of WMD-related posturing was evident in the wake of the September 11 attacks. Early in Operation Enduring Freedom, there was considerable concern that Al Qaeda forces in Afghanistan might have a nuclear weapon ready to deploy against American forces.[6] U.S. troops operating on the ground in Afghanistan subsequently discovered materials suggesting Al Qaeda's WMD ambitions. Meanwhile, as operations were proceeding in Afghanistan, instability in Pakistan precipitated calls for American forces to be prepared "should . . . Islamabad . . . lose control over its nuclear arsenal."[7]

In his State of the Union address to the nation on 29 January 2002, Bush made it clear that the next phase of the War on Terror would focus on rogue state proliferators of WMD. Describing the new "axis of evil" doctrine, Bush left little doubt about the primary criterion for membership: "By seeking weapons of mass destruction, these regimes pose a grave and growing danger. . . . They could attack our allies or attempt to blackmail the United States."[8] The new strategy was further elaborated at a speech to West Point cadets in June. Warning against a world where "even weak states . . . could attain a catastrophic power to strike great nations," Bush argued that preemption was imperative: "If we wait for threats to fully materialize, we will have waited too long. . . . Americans [must] . . . be ready for preemptive action when necessary."[9] These ideas were subsequently codified in major strategy documents produced by the Pentagon in September and December 2002.[10]

The first test case of the Bush administration's signature doctrine has plainly been Saddam Hussein's Iraq. Iraq's efforts to acquire WMD figured prominently in building the case for war. Despite the evidence for a plethora of banned WMD-related activities, detailed in the October 2003 Kay Report,[11] the Bush administration has suffered embarassment from the fact that the Iraq Survey Group was unable to find any actual WMD. Many critics have taken issue with the administration's doctrine of preemption, both in the abstract and in the particular case of Iraq. The very title of this book reflects a widespread critique that the Bush doctrine is one of preventive war rather than "preemption."[12] It has been argued that the doctrine is contrary to American ideals, that it violates both the Constitution and international law, that it will cause the wars it intends to prevent, that it will

encourage other states to undertake aggressive acts, and that it will undermine international goodwill toward the United States, weakening alliances and threatening U.S. interests worldwide.[13] Numerous analysts objected to war against Iraq, arguing that the risks of a devastating Iraqi counterattack using biological weapons were too great.[14] Administration hawks, for example deputy secretary of defense Paul Wolfowitz, said they were cognizant of this possibility and ready to face it. In December 2002, Wolfowitz wrote, "Saddam Hussein might actually use his most terrible weapons. . . . War is risky, brutal and unpredictable; anyone who does not understand that should not be involved in military planning."[15]

As the Bush administration went about amassing domestic and international support for its Iraq policy, and amid new and grave tensions in the Middle East generally, WMD threats became commonplace. In February 2002, a senior Iraqi official seemed to allude to Iraqi WMD capabilities when he suggested that the United States "would face 'dreadful consequences'—worse than those of September 11—if it continued to 'trample whole nations.'"[16] Perhaps in response to the Iraqi assertion, the British defense secretary announced in mid-March that Britain "would be ready to make a nuclear strike against states such as Iraq if they used weapons of mass destruction against British forces."[17] Before beginning the war to remove Saddam, Washington announced that it would respond "with all our options" if WMD were used against its troops.[18] However, recent WMD threats have not been restricted to the current Iraq crisis. "Iran warned Israel . . . not to consider attacking its nuclear power plant, saying it would retaliate in ways 'unimaginable.'"[19] Tehran is reported to be reinforcing the air defenses around its nuclear facilities.[20]

As the Iraq crisis neared a climax, and perhaps buoyed by favorable developments in South Korean politics, North Korea created a new crisis with a series of provocative gestures. Tensions increased after North Korean officials appear to have admitted to a clandestine nuclear weapons program when confronted with evidence by assistant secretary of state for Asia-Pacific affairs James Kelly in early October 2002. Despite the Bush administration's eagerness to play down this new complication of its overall strategy, the North Korean leadership has continuously ratcheted up the pressure. In December 2002, Pyongyang sent IAEA (International Atomic Energy Agency) monitors home, dismantled monitoring cameras at key installations, and declared its intention to restart fuel reprocessing operations at its facility in Yongbyon.

Like the Iraq crisis, the dilemma could once again be reduced to the question of whether a small proliferator can deter the United States with a nascent WMD arsenal. In this case, however, because Pyongyang is

assessed to already have one or two nuclear weapons in its arsenal and perhaps the ability to manufacture many more within a short time, the question is that much more acute. Many analysts have concluded that the existing North Korean nuclear arsenal is sufficiently threatening to justify extreme caution on Washington's part. Indeed, they interpret the very different policies pursued by the administration versus Iraq, on the one hand, and North Korea, on the other, as evidence of the leveling impact of even a couple of nuclear weapons. A senior official recently said to a reporter, for example, "You can strike before [they] get nukes . . . but not after."[21]

Others have pointed out that the nuclear factor is less important than the fact that Seoul and the American "tripwire" force are well within range of North Korea's voluminous artillery. Nevertheless, there is also a large community of expert commentators calling for the Bush administration to take a strong stand against Pyongyang, up to and including using force. Going against the grain of the administration's conciliatory message, Secretary of Defense Rumsfeld suggested that North Korea should not "feel emboldened. . . . We are perfectly capable of doing what is necessary."[22] Interestingly, some of the most hawkish voices to emerge during this latest Korean crisis come from the Democratic Party's foreign policy elite. Senior Clinton administration officials Samuel Berger and Robert Galluci, for example, have written that tough terms going far beyond the former Agreed Framework in terms of inspections of nuclear facilities should be handed to Pyongyang, especially as a first step toward sanctions and possibly "more robust options."[23] Likewise, Leon Fuerth, a longtime foreign policy advisor to Al Gore, asserts that if a negotiated solution to stop the North Korean nuclear program fails, the administration must "prepare for a second major military enterprise in Korea—one that would take place simultaneously, or nearly so, with action against Iraq."[24] Indeed, a leading interpretation of present administration policy is that Washington simply "put action against Iraq first," but left "North Korea in a queue."[25]

The 2003 Iraq War and the ongoing crises with both Iran and North Korea are not exceptional. They do not, as some have complained, simply represent the triumph of neoconservative ideology in U.S. foreign policy. Rather, they are the hallmark of the present age. At the core of each conflict is whether reliance on the "absolute weapon" will allow the weak to successfully confront the strong. It is no exaggeration to assert that we might have been safer during the Cold War, when huge arsenals and hair-trigger alerts made war truly unthinkable. Today, there is no agreement among conflicting parties as to what constitutes the "unthinkable." Grave instability results when radical power asymmetries are combined

with WMD. As one expert on nuclear matters put it recently, "This is the most dangerous time since the 1962 Cuban missile crisis."[26] Similarly, the Central Intelligence Agency has concluded that "the chance that a missile with a nuclear, chemical, or biological warhead will be used against U.S. forces or interests is greater today than during most of the Cold War."[27]

ASYMMETRIC WMD RIVALRY IN THE POST–COLD WAR INTERNATIONAL SYSTEM

It is all too tempting to ascribe the current commotion about WMD proliferation to post–September 11 sensitivities. In fact, the disturbing outlines of the unstable effects of asymmetric WMD rivalry manifested themselves throughout U.S. defense and foreign policy during the 1990s. Given U.S. ascendance to the status of "hyperpower," along with the increasing availability of technologies and the knowledge to exploit them, asymmetric WMD rivalry stands as the dominant conflict paradigm of our era. It is an unaltered structural circumstance of the post–Cold War world, simply exaggerated by September 11. In other words, WMD proliferation and the accompanying instability of this process are likely natural byproducts of unipolarity.

Since the demise of the USSR, America is the only state with the capability to project overwhelming force into all corners of the globe. As if its military superiority weren't already impressive enough, a technological revolution in military affairs appears to be further increasing this dominance. These capabilities are backed by unrivaled economic power and a cultural milieu that is uniquely dynamic and innovative. Moreover, America's liberal ideology, tested and ultimately strengthened by the successful struggles against fascism and then communism, determines that its interests know practically no bounds. Thus, enhanced capabilities together with altered intentions have resulted in a steady increase in America's propensity for military intervention: from the Persian Gulf to East Africa, from the Balkans to the Taiwan Straits, from Central Asia to the Korean Peninsula.

But WMD proliferation is the fly in the ointment. Partly in the natural course of technological "progress," partly as the result of former Soviet scientific expertise on sale for cheap, and partly as a reflection of frustration with American dominance, the genie has come out of the bottle. Indeed, many of the post–Cold War brushfires that America has confronted revolved around WMD proliferation.

The Persian Gulf War (1990–91) was the first counterproliferation war. In this conflict, the United States faced off with an Iraq on the verge of nuclear capability and already in possession of chemical and biological weapons. Iraq's developing nuclear capabilities appear to have been an essential motivating factor for U.S. leaders to confront Saddam Hussein sooner rather than later.[28] Recent studies assert that Saddam's biological weapons arsenal also may have influenced the Bush administration's decision on war termination.[29] Whether or not this was the case, there is ample evidence of risky behavior on both sides of this asymmetric conflict.[30]

The world came to the brink of a second counterproliferation war when the United States confronted North Korea's nuclear aspirations during the spring and summer of 1994. The stakes were no less than in the present conflict with Pyongyang. There was widespread support for halting the North Korean program in its tracks. The relatively moderate *Economist*, for example, editorialized: "Faced with a chilling choice of risks—between a preemptive strike to cripple North Korea's nuclear program and waiting until its tough talk is backed up by nuclear threats—America would . . . be right to strike first."[31] In secretary of defense Richard Perry's recent narrative of the crisis, he reveals: "We knew that we were poised on the brink of a war that might involve weapons of mass destruction."[32] He further testifies that the carefully planned U.S. preemptive attack "without question would have achieved its objective."

Two further crises illustrate this trend. During the winter of 1995–96, Beijing appears to have made a nuclear threat related to the developing Taiwan crisis.[33] While China certainly cannot be described as a rogue proliferator, its arsenal is still limited enough that certain unstable dynamics inherent to asymmetry could apply. Note that U.S. experts are unsure what role nuclear weapons might play in a United States–China conflict over Taiwan.[34] Also in the spring of 1996, the United States entered into a showdown with Muammar Qaddafi over Libya's chemical weapons complex at Tarhunah. After journeying to Egypt, a potential staging area for any attack on Libya, Perry bluntly warned Qaddafi in late April, "If necessary, the United States is fully prepared to take other, more drastic preventive measures."[35] Here again, war was narrowly averted by diplomacy. Recent revelations regarding Libya's WMD activities suggest that chemical weapons, in addition to a nuclear weapons research effort, were only recently eliminated, as part of the "best nonproliferation deal ever made," which was agreed to in 2003.[36]

Given this parade of WMD crises, it is not at all surprising that a Pentagon counterforce program, called the Counterproliferation Initiative

(CPI), became a department priority during the Clinton administration. The CPI was founded in 1993 by Secretary of Defense Les Aspin, who observed: "[WMD] may still be the great equalizer; the problem is that the U.S. may now be the equalizee."[37] In addition to promoting active and passive defense measures, this initiative has supported research, for example, into improved sensors, and also specialized munitions—such as those that contain atmospheric dispersion.[38] The CPI is only the natural response to asymmetric WMD rivalry. Indeed, well before either the September 11 attacks or the Bush doctrine of preemption, former Pentagon official Michelle Flournoy observed, "Nuclear proliferation will require U.S. decisionmakers to consider, for the first time in decades, a much broader range of military options [including] . . . preventive war, preemption, and defense."[39] Similarly, Barry Schneider wrote, "The enemy may only possess a half dozen or so of such weapons at the time of the conflict—few enough to neutralize."[40]

These crises and the responses to these crises during the 1990s illustrate that asymmetric WMD rivalry is not a new condition. As relative U.S. power increased after the Cold War in conjunction with increasing WMD proliferation, this conflict paradigm emerged as the most important of the present era. Conflict between the great powers seems to be an increasingly remote possibility.[41] After the September 11 attacks, terrorism is an important competing threat. However, it remains far from clear that WMD terrorism is truly feasible, especially if prudent precautionary steps are taken.[42] By contrast, the post–Cold War world has witnessed repeated WMD proliferation crises, any one of which might have included the use of WMD, or at least attacks upon those weapons. Indeed, the second war against Saddam and the continuing crises with North Korea and Iran confirm this characteristic of the current international system. To use Les Aspin's word, this book seeks to grapple with the question of to what extent the United States will now be the "equalizee."

THE EXISTING LITERATURE

A major result of the extensive academic debate on proliferation is the consensus that a much greater effort must be made to develop the empirical basis for discussion and subsequent theorizing. This is an effort to move the academic discussion away from the surreal discussions of deterrence that were the hallmark of strategic debate in the late Cold War, and toward the systematic study of rivalries in other strategic contexts, spe-

cifically those characterized by asymmetry. Thus, Peter Feaver concludes, "A high priority for future research should be empirical inquiries into how established nuclear states have in fact interacted with . . . emerging proliferants."[43] Brad Roberts likewise suggests, "The last half century, like the present decade, offers a rich set of relationships among nuclear and quasi-nuclear states that deserve thoughtful reflection."[44]

Some vital first steps in developing this empirical basis have been country- or rivalry-specific studies, such as those written by David Holloway on the Soviet atomic project, Avner Cohen on the Israeli program, or Devin Hagerty on nuclear rivalry in South Asia.[45] A much-needed theoretical leap into comparative study was taken by Jorn Gjelstad and Olav Njolstad with their edited volume, *Nuclear Rivalry and International Order*.[46] However, even this effort was quite limited, since it only used one axis of comparison: the contemporary South Asian rivalry with that of the Cold War superpowers. Thus, the work suffers from a commonly noted problem in proliferation studies: it is "too closely tied to a single empirical example [i.e., the United States–Soviet experience]."[47]

Editors Peter Lavoy, Scott Sagan, and James Wirtz have brought research on WMD proliferation to a qualitatively new level with their recent volume, *Planning the Unthinkable: How New Powers Will Use Nuclear, Biological, and Chemical Weapons*.[48] As may be expected, this extremely wide-ranging comparison yields important insights. For example, it highlights the diversity among different kinds of WMD, on the one hand, and among the likely employment doctrines of various states, on the other. An obvious shortcoming, however, which the editors themselves note, is the "severe lack of empirical information on proliferators' plans and policies."[49] While the exercise proves extremely worthwhile, a study of contemporary WMD proliferators of this sort is necessarily limited primarily to speculation.

This book is a useful companion to *Planning the Unthinkable* in at least two respects. First, in concentrating on rivalries that ended more than a decade ago, the project reaches for a higher empirical standard. For example, China was considered a rogue proliferator in the past, but it has since opened up to a considerable extent for researchers. It also has an impressive group of scholars working in the disciplines of history and international security. Insights from these scholars put this research about WMD rivalry on a firmer empirical footing. Moreover, it is only natural that we have better perspective on events once they are in the distant past and passions have cooled. These five deep historical case studies rely on field research conducted in four different countries.

A second methodological problem with *Planning the Unthinkable* concerns the scheme of carving up the subject into chapter studies on each

state. The problem with that approach is that state policies are portrayed in a vacuum. A superior method, especially for understanding WMD, is to focus on rivalries. This choice allows the richest possible understanding of the interactive processes, which are the very essence of strategy. To rectify these two problems, the bulk of this book is devoted to consideration of five asymmetric nuclear rivalries from history. To ensure its relevance to current policy questions, however, the penultimate chapter surveys seven contemporary rivalries. The Bush doctrine is thoroughly analyzed in Chapter 10.

FINDINGS

The theoretical findings of this book are primarily relevant to an ongoing debate within the field of security studies. This debate pits "proliferation optimism," which emphasizes the stabilizing benefits of WMD proliferation, against "proliferation pessimism," which highlights the dangers of this ongoing process. While conceding to the optimists that "nuclear peace" can arise within roughly symmetric rivalries, this study finds that radically asymmetric nuclear rivalries show a strong tendency toward instability. In particular, superior states tend to see a "ticking clock" with respect to the inferior state's WMD program, creating deep and pervasive fears about possible shifting balances of power, and a desire to fight sooner rather than later. Moreover, very small arsenals do not seem to have the stabilizing deterrent effects attributed to them by the optimists. Illustrating a strong intellectual current among academic strategists, one scholar recently noted, "[WMD] deterrence [by rogue states] is of increasing potency against the United States."[50] The findings of this study challenge the deterrent value of nascent WMD arsenals.

These conclusions are drawn from the analysis of five deep case studies, which comprise the bulk of this book, and a further seven mini-cases. In almost every case, a familiar pattern manifests itself: a smaller power reaches for WMD, and crises develop as the larger power schemes to prevent the perceived shift in the balance of power. The basis for the instability is simply the incentive to strike first and to strike early. If the adversary's WMD program can be stopped in its early phases, then the threat may not materialize at all. As Lawrence Freedman explains, "Preventive war advocacy was based on a historical shift in the military balance. Any moment before that shift had been completed would be favorable for a strike; any movement after completion would be unfavorable."[51] At

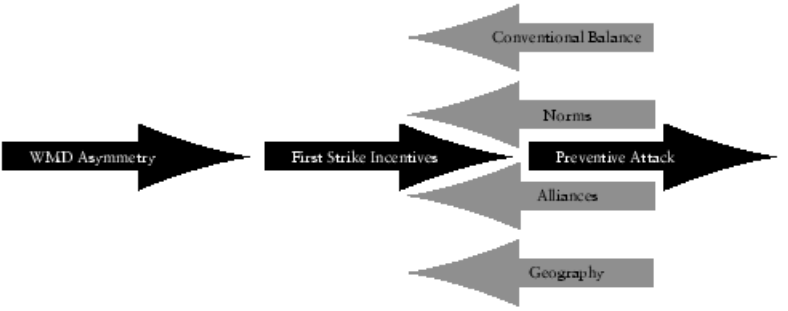
some point, however, the WMD program does seem to cross a threshold, and stable deterrence may result. The argument between the optimists and pessimists is, in large measure, about where that threshold lies. Some cases included in this book, for example the Sino-Indian case (Chapter 6) and the late Cold War mini-case, demonstrate the opposite condition: roughly symmetric WMD rivalries that evince more stable relations.

A passing glance at the data gathered here could plausibly yield the conclusion that WMD rivalries are actually stabilizing. Indeed, there is just one instance of an actual preventive strike (Chapter 7) resulting from the instability described. However, a much closer examination of these cases reveals a very dangerous pattern of instability. It might be routine for military establishments to prepare for the worst, creating war plans for all contingencies, but it is clear that a genuine crisis is taking place when heads of state themselves become involved in the war planning process—a rare and ominous development. There is ample evidence of instability—so defined—in the cases under consideration.

If asymmetric WMD rivalries are plagued by instability, why has military action rarely resulted? Study of the cases suggests four countervailing factors—factors that work against first-strike incentives and may prevail in various circumstances. First, geography can inhibit aggressive action by the stronger power. This factor is evident in both the 1994 crisis and the present crisis between the United States and North Korea. Seoul is within range of artillery and other weapons, irrespective of Pyongyang's nuclear capabilities, making a military solution much more difficult. A second factor concerns international norms—informal rules that govern state conduct in world politics. These norms are evident, for example, in the early Cold War, when President Harry Truman would brook no consideration of preventive war against the USSR, because he considered such policies to be contrary to the practices of democratic, peace-loving states. Another factor is the influence of third parties. When Kennedy contemplated striking China's nascent nuclear forces in the 1960s, American diplomats were dispatched to get Khrushchev's assent. The Soviet leader could not be convinced, however, dampening American enthusiasm for taking the initiative.

Finally, the conventional balance is decisive in the calculations of the superior power. Just as Washington felt inhibited about striking Chinese nuclear facilities because it feared large-scale Chinese conventional intervention in the developing Vietnam War, so Moscow feared that its defenses in the east were inadequate against a determined Chinese conventional attack in 1969. More recently, North Korea's large and well dug-in army appears to have been a significant restraint on the United States in the 1994 crisis, and perhaps today as well.

FIGURE 1.1
The Basic Model



Some reasonable objections can be made to the foregoing analysis. What is meant by instability? How will we recognize a war-threatening crisis? As explained in detail in Chapter 2, our interest is in why certain hostile relationships are particularly volatile. True, most of the cases examined in this study did not flare into war, but there is still value in differentiating highly volatile relationships from simple hostile relationships. For example, the United States currently has hostile relationships with the states of Belarus and Burma. However, such hostile relations are a far cry from the volatility that has plagued American relations with Iraq, Iran, and North Korea. The basic model (see Figure 1.1) that emerges from this research will not predict outbreaks of warfare so much as identify structural-material conditions of grave instability, within which the factors identified above, as well as other, exogenous factors (e.g., leadership personality, etc.) unique to each context, will determine the outcome.

What constitutes evidence of crisis-ridden relations? After all, military establishments are always planning for the worst. Perhaps somewhere in the bowels of the Pentagon, one could also find contingency military plans for operations against Belarus, Burma, and others. However, the primary criterion for crises that is used in this research is high-level leaders reviewing war plans. Needless to say, senior leaders are exceptionally busy and therefore likely to consider the details of war plans only during times of crisis.

Proliferation optimists have focused too narrowly on outcomes: preventive wars have been rare and nuclear weapons have not been used since World War II. But these theorists ignore history's close calls at our peril. Indeed, it has been observed that theorists of international relations have great trouble predicting events, precisely because of a fail-

ure to imagine alternative outcomes in analyzing historical events.[52] The cases presented in this book illustrate a pattern of disturbingly dangerous interstate behavior. It is nevertheless important at this stage to point out that this book does not provide for definitive resolution of the debate about the role of nascent WMD arsenals in world politics. This study actualy does yield some limited evidence for proliferation optimists. Moreover, restricted access to archives and former leaders (especially abroad) renders the conclusions presented here as tentative.

Nonetheless, the most fundamental finding of this broad comparative study is that policymakers and scholars must consider the inherently destabilizing short-term consequences of WMD proliferation. The conclusion is based on fieldwork in four countries, the extensive use of newly declassified U.S. documents, access to unique foreign secondary sources, and a survey of the "new" Cold War history. Beyond demonstrating the strength of the above thesis, this study aims to broaden and diversify the conversation about the consequences of proliferation for world order, and so contribute to the crafting of careful policies that might allow scholars to continue to ruminate on "nonevents."