Strategic Insight

The Role of Preventive Strikes in Counterproliferation Strategy: Two Case Studies

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Strategic Insights are published monthly by the Center for Contemporary Conflict (CCC). The CCC is the research arm of the National Security Affairs Department at the Naval Postgraduate School in Monterey, California. The views expressed here are those of the author and do not necessarily represent the views of the Naval Postgraduate School, the Department of Defense, or the U.S. Government.

October 1, 2003

The strategic push by the Bush administration to use preemptive and preventive measures to counter the proliferation of weapons of mass destruction has met with criticism since the release of the *National Strategy to Combat Weapons of Mass Destruction* in 2002. Using preventive strikes within a counterproliferation policy cannot make the proliferation threat go away, but it can slow nuclear weapons development programs. Whether or not a preventive strike is launched, however, depends on the availability of credible intelligence; a determination that the benefits of taking action outweigh the costs of a preventive strike; and the belief that the long-term political consequences of a preventive strike can be managed. Those ideal conditions often occur when leaders identify an immediate direct threat against a state's vital interests. The Israeli strike on the Iraqi nuclear plant at Osirak in 1981, and the Johnson administration's consideration of preventive strikes against China's Lop Nur nuclear plant in 1963 offer insight into the way policymakers use force as part of a counterproliferation policy.

Israel's Attack on Osirak

Contrary to what is typically written about the Israeli air strike on the Osirak reactor in Iraq, the mission was not preemptive, but preventive. Iraq was far from reaching nuclear weapons capability at the time of attack. The attack was controversial because it was the first occasion where a state engaged in a preventive action against another state's nuclear program without any immediate provocation. Israeli Prime Minister Menachem Begin issued the order to attack because he feared that his party would lose the next election, and he did not believe the opposition had the fortitude to destroy the Iraqi nuclear weapons infrastructure before it produced a bomb.

Iraq ratified the Non-Proliferation Treaty (NPT) on 29 October 1969, pledged not to manufacture nuclear weapons, and agreed to place all its nuclear materials and facilities under IAEA safeguards.[1] Saddam Hussein, while Vice Chairman of the Revolutionary Command Council, initiated the Iraqi nuclear weapons program in the 1970s.[2] Iraq purchased a reactor from France in 1975 with the intent to use it for civil power purposes, but the acquisition of highly enriched uranium in the program generated international concern. The worst fears of the international community were realized when after an attack by Iran in the early days of the Iran-Iraq war in September 1980, the official Iraqi news agency issued the following statement: "The Iranian people should not fear the Iraqi nuclear reactor, which is not intended to be used against Iran, but against the Zionist entity."[3] This single statement indicated not only that Iraq was pursuing a nuclear bomb, but also that Israel would be the primary the target of Iraq's nascent nuclear arsenal.

On 7 June 1981 Israel took preventive action against the Iraqi nuclear program by conducting a surprise attack on the Osirak reactor. Before the decision to strike was made, Israeli officials debated the timing of the attack, and a dispute over whether the problem should be resolved by military or diplomatic action ensued between the two major Israeli parties. The Labor party favored diplomatic efforts. It adopted a "wait and see" policy that relied upon diplomacy to try to forestall the Iraq effort. In 1981, Labor leaders believed an understanding with then French President Francois Mitterand had been reached that

reversed the French policy of assisting Iraq's nuclear program. Prime Minister Begin, leader of the Likud Party, disagreed with this approach. He did not trust leaving this matter to the French, to fate, and certainly not to the reasonableness of Saddam Hussein. He thought military action was the only remedy to a nascent Iraqi nuclear threat.

Once Begin issued the strike order, timing became the next item of concern. Major General David Ivry, then Chief of the Israeli Air Force (IAF), maintained that "we have to attack before uranium was going to get to the facility, because otherwise, after attacking with uranium inside, it can cause radiation damage to the environment."[4] Israeli officials were concerned about the potential of nuclear fallout from the destruction of the reactor reaching populated areas of Iraq. The Israeli intelligence community recommended canceling the operation hours before the strike was to commence out of fear that it would disrupt Israeli peace negotiations with Egypt.[5] Begin ignored this recommendation and ordered the attack to proceed. On 7 July 1981 at 5:35pm, eight F-16s dropped sixteen tons of explosives on the Osirak reactor.[6]

Shown at the left is the view from an Israeli F-16 as it targeted the Iraqi nuclear reactor. The attack is thought by some to have delayed the Iraqi nuclear program by over a decade. Others, however, suggest that the reactor's destruction speeded up Iraq's program and helped spur Saddam to create the industrial-scale type effort that was uncovered by UN inspectors after Gulf War I.

The destruction of the Osirak reactor greatly affected Iraq's nuclear program. Although the attack took Iraq off the fast track to nuclear weapons, Baghdad responded furiously by doubling its efforts to obtain the bomb. It assigned 20,000 people to work on the nuclear program and accelerated development of gas centrifuges to produce bomb-grade material. Iraq spent over $10 billion on prohibited components and its denial and deception methods to conceal related facilities and technologies.[7]

While the United States publicly denounced the Israeli assault, it was criticized for its tertiary involvement in the attack. The Israelis used U.S. manufactured equipment as a delivery system for the operation, and the United States provided intelligence support to the Israelis before and after the attack. The F-16s were sold to Israel for defensive purposes only and their use in an offensive, unprovoked attack constituted a violation of the United States Arms Export Control Act.[8] The U.S. Congress reviewed a report citing the violation, but little was done in response to its findings. The United States, although embarrassed by Israel's violation, maintained its support for Israel despite the protests made by Iraq and other Arab states.[9] Intelligence support was forthcoming from the United States following a secret agreement initiated by Director of Central Intelligence, William J. Casey, with the Israelis in which Tel Aviv promised not to challenge the U.S. sale of the Airborne Warning Control Systems (AWACS) to Saudi Arabia in exchange for target information on Iraq's Osirak nuclear reactor outside of Baghdad.[10] It was later discovered that the intelligence information far exceeded the requirements of the raid and that Israel drew material from U.S. intelligence sources on Libya and Pakistan. In response, the U.S. intelligence

community imposed a limit on satellite information shared with Israel to extend only 250 miles beyond its borders.

The destruction of the Osirak reactor proved detrimental to Iraq's nuclear program, and the Israelis maintained that it deferred Baghdad's nuclear technology and material acquisition for a decade. Former United Nations chief nuclear weapons inspector David A. Kay estimated that if Iraq had been left undisturbed, it could have acquired a nuclear bomb by 1992.[11] The Israelis believed that the Iraqi nuclear program was a risk to Israel's national security and acted accordingly to protect their sovereignty. U.S. tertiary involvement in the strike led to greater tensions in U.S.-Iraqi relations. It is quite possible that if the Iraqis had gained nuclear weapons, they would have launched an even more aggressive policy. Preventive action worked in that it helped prevent Iraq from obtaining nuclear weapons, but not without cost in terms of U.S. relations with Arab states.

China's Nuclear Program and the U.S. Response

China detonated its first nuclear device on 20 October 1964. The fact that China conducted the test earlier than the United States expected left the Johnson administration wondering how to address the new Chinese nuclear threat. Months earlier, however, interest in preemptive strikes against the Chinese nuclear program increased in the White House and the Central Intelligence Agency (CIA). Declassified documents released in the mid-1990s revealed that a U.S. preemptive attack on China's nuclear plants was considered as a possible operation to disrupt the Chinese program.

There was a great deal of secrecy surrounding the Chinese nuclear program and the U.S. intelligence community had few collection capabilities available to target the Chinese program. The first reconnaissance satellites were launched in August 1960, but the first valuable photographs of the Chinese nuclear program were not taken before 1961, after the Chinese program was well underway.[12] Additionally, U.S. intelligence falsely estimated that the Chinese used plutonium, not uranium, in their nuclear research, which resulted in severe miscalculations by U.S. analysts in estimating when a usable device would be ready for testing.[13]

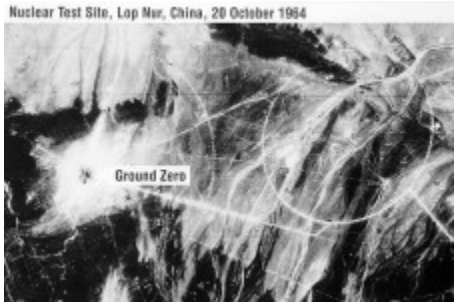
Further inaccurate estimates regarding Chinese nuclear technology resulted when analysts used the timelines maintained by the United States and Soviet Union for their respective nuclear programs. Due to the failure of intelligence to collect and analyze information about the Chinese nuclear program, President Johnson and his advisors were forced to make a decision with very limited knowledge of the situation.

In April 1965, as the Chinese nuclear program got closer to fielding a testable device, Special Assistant to the President W.W. Rostow issued a memorandum that addressed possible U.S. actions regarding the Chinese nuclear threat. He stated that preemptive action "would be undesirable except as part of a military action against the mainland in response to major ChiCom [Chinese Communist] aggression. Prospects for covert action should receive continued examination."[14] The memo discussed what military posture the United States should take in Asia in its entirety, and concluded that the U.S. "posture should combine an implicit nuclear threat and a visible ability to deal conventionally with Communist aggression."[15] Maintaining a strong stance within Asia in its entirety was more important than specifically dealing with the Chinese nuclear threat.

By mid-September 1964, six weeks before the Chinese test, McGeorge Bundy, National Security Advisor to President Johnson, issued a memo declaring that "we are not in favor of unprovoked unilateral U.S. military action against Chinese nuclear installations at this time. We would prefer to have a Chinese test take place than to initiate such action now." Bundy also stated that there was interest in pursuing a combined action with the Soviet Union against the Chinese nuclear threat. He thought that warnings issued jointly by the United States and Soviet Union would be useful and that "even a possible agreement to cooperate in preventive military action" would be a viable option if the Soviets were interested. The final determination on the matter was that further attempts to gather information regarding the Chinese nuclear facilities should be done in an aircraft with Chinese Nationalist (Taiwanese) markings and pilots to hide

U.S. involvement in the reconnaissance effort. President Johnson approved this course of action and the issue of preventive strikes against the Chinese faded from the policy agenda.[16] Earlier studies estimated that Soviet cooperation was improbable, and that since the "United States had not identified all of the relevant targets, an unprovoked attack would entail heavy foreign policy costs."[17] The Chinese threat could not "justify … actions which would involve great political costs or high military risks."[18]

The official Chinese announcement after the detonation 16 October 1964 stated that it was "a major achievement" and China's struggle to strengthen its defenses was needed to "oppose the U.S. imperialist policy of nuclear blackmail and nuclear threats."[19] While the White House's calmly reacted to the nuclear test, a debate continued over whether or not preventive strikes were the correct course of action.



At left is an overhead shot of the Lop Nur test site in October 1964. The U.S. gave serious consideration to destroying the site before China's successful test in October 1964.

A commentary issued after the explosion by George W. Rathjens, an official with the Arms Control and Disarmament Agency, revealed that the major flaw of the inaction strategy was the failure of intelligence to properly identify key targets and to estimate the level of Chinese technology capabilities accurately. "In the light of reactions to the Chinese nuclear tests … it would appear that the political effects of the attainment of Chinese nuclear capabilities may also have been underestimated … further consideration of direct action against Chinese nuclear facilities may be warranted."[20]

Attempting preventive strikes against the Chinese nuclear program in 1964 could have slowed Beijing's nuclear program, but there was no guarantee that such action would completely destroy the ambitions of Mao Zedong and his regime to build a nuclear weapon. Preemptive action would have required total destruction of all facilities and all personnel associated with the program and the Johnson administration deemed it would be too costly and most likely unsuccessful. With the need to contain the Soviet Union and the expanding war in Vietnam, targeting the Chinese nuclear program was not a top priority in 1964.

Conclusion

Israeli officials believed that their national security required a preventive strike on Iraq's nuclear program as a necessary mission to protect their sovereignty, whereas U.S. officials believed that the consequences of striking China were costly without holding out the promise of destroying the Chinese nuclear program. In the case of Israel and Osirak, the threat posed by Iraq was perceived to be extremely high, while the opportunity to cripple the Iraqi nuclear program appeared within reach. In the case of the United States and China in the 1960s, the development of a Chinese nuclear capability was perceived to be threatening, but no easy way was identified to cripple the Chinese nuclear program.

Preventive strikes might be an effective course of action against states, such as North Korea and Iran, who have ignored international agreements and pursued their respective nuclear, chemical, and biological programs. Preventive military action will remain an option in U.S. counterproliferation strategy, but two necessary conditions have to be met before such attacks will take place. First, policymakers will have to see the threat of allowing current trends and programs to continue as worse than the problems that would follow in the aftermath of a preventive attack. Second, destruction of identified targets has to hold out the prospect of slowing or temporarily curtailing the rogue state's efforts to obtain weapons of mass destruction. As the previous comparison of the decisions made by U.S. and Israeli officials

suggests, these circumstances are not always present when policymakers contemplate preventive action to stop another state from acquiring nuclear weapons.

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