

Deterrence and Prevention as Strategic Concepts

by [Michael Eisenstadt \(/experts/michael-eisenstadt\)](/experts/michael-eisenstadt)

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ABOUT THE AUTHORS



[Michael Eisenstadt \(/experts/michael-eisenstadt\)](/experts/michael-eisenstadt)

Michael Eisenstadt is the Kahn Fellow and director of The Washington Institute's Military and Security Studies Program.



In-Depth Reports

On May 11, 2007, Charles Hill, Kurt Campbell, and Michael Eisenstadt addressed The Washington Institute's Soref Symposium. Mr. Hill is a diplomat-in-residence at Yale University. Dr. Campbell is cofounder and chief executive officer of the Center for a New American Security. Mr. Eisenstadt is a senior fellow and director of the [Military and Security Studies Program \(http://www.washingtoninstitute.org/templateC11.php?CID=64\)](http://www.washingtoninstitute.org/templateC11.php?CID=64) at the Institute. The following is a rapporteur's summary of their remarks. [Download a free PDF of the entire symposium proceedings \(http://www.washingtoninstitute.org/templateC04.php?CID=278\)](http://www.washingtoninstitute.org/templateC04.php?CID=278).

CHARLES HILL

The American strategic community is undergoing a conceptual crisis today. Unlike the Cold War era, with its well-defined notions of prevention and deterrence, the current environment is marked by nonstate actors operating without a return address or the accompanying fear of mutually assured destruction. Therefore, deterrence may not be the sole or preferred solution to the Iranian impasse.

Preemption, although a necessary tool protected by the UN Charter, is widely considered a last-resort measure in the confrontation with Iran. In its place, prevention has shaped the U.S. discussion over how to deal with international crises -- specifically, it is the approach Washington is relying on with regard to Iran and North Korea. Prevention was also the preferred U.S. strategy in the run-up to the war in Iraq. That approach entailed assembling a broad international coalition that would build on past UN Security Council resolutions in order to inflict greater pain on the Iraqi regime.

Ultimately, however, this Security Council "ladder approach" is inadequate for prevention because it depends on the concept of collective security, the centerpiece of the international system. Although collective security works in some cases, it has proven inadequate for confronting major international crises. This explains the U.S. decision to move unilaterally against Iraq. Prior to 2003, a coalition had been established to level sanctions against the Iraqi regime. When the time came to take action against Iraq, however, the international community was hesitant.

Taking action against Iran in the face of similar hesitancy would be detrimental to the United States. This fact highlights the ongoing erosion witnessed in traditional notions of collective security, deterrence, and prevention.

KURT CAMPBELL

There is a tendency to view concepts used during the Cold War nostalgically -- to recall them as clear, durable, and easily applied. Although such certainty did not really exist during the conflict with the Soviet Union, some of the era's theories can still be usefully applied to the current strategic environment.

The central conundrum raised by Iran's activities is the fear that the regime would use nuclear weapons without provocation. Other concerns include the instability associated with countries that have recently acquired nuclear weapons; the prospect that Tehran would make nuclear technology or materials available to other actors, either deliberately or unknowingly; and the uncertain regional response to Iranian and North Korean nuclearization.

Notwithstanding bombastic comments from Iran's leadership and the difficulty of deciphering its rhetoric, the United States cannot risk underestimating the regime's intentions. Iran's ongoing activities, combined with the situation in Iraq, present the United States with enormous challenges in a worrisome strategic environment.

Indeed, the U.S. invasion of Iraq may be Washington's greatest foreign policy mistake in recent memory. Despite the significant domestic turmoil that resulted from Vietnam, for example, the United States was able to regain its strategic position in Asia within five years. This is unlikely to be the case in the Middle East, given the serious opportunity costs of the Iraq war. These costs include the alienation of allies who should be supporting the United States but do not, as well as the potential for U.S. military overreaction against Iran given the recent blunders in Iraq. The Iraq situation could also constrain Washington's ability to confront Tehran, which now has greater leverage than the United States on the Iraq issue.

In light of these problems, the next president will need to understand the limits of U.S. power and, perhaps, consider the Cold War concept of coexistence. Washington should also put forth a richer diplomatic effort toward Tehran, largely in order to foster division within Iran's ruling coalitions and provide the United States with additional openings. With Iran banking on being isolated and preparing itself accordingly, the United States should make every effort to show the international community that it is willing to explore all options. On a larger scale, the next president will face a new strategic environment dominated by two major issues: the growing trend of Islamic fundamentalism and the rise of China.

MICHAEL EISENSTADT

Prevention and deterrence are not mutually exclusive concepts. In the case of Iran, the benefits of prevention would likely be short-lived, making it a nonviable alternative to deterrence -- the default option for dealing with a nuclear-armed adversary.

A prevention-based approach to the Iranian nuclear issue would entail acceptance of significant near-term risks, including the possibility that preventive action would not achieve its intended policy goal; the likelihood of retaliatory terrorist attacks that would kill hundreds, if not thousands; the potential disruption of oil shipments from the Persian Gulf; and the possibility that preventive measures would make a stable deterrent relationship more difficult to achieve.

Moreover, simply implementing a prevention-based strategy would raise a number of challenges. On the domestic political front, the White House would most likely fail in any effort to obtain a joint resolution from Congress sanctioning preventive military action against Iran. Alternatively, if the president were to consult with only a few congressmen prior to an attack, public support for the action would likely be lost. Target intelligence is another challenge. Detailed, accurate intelligence is a sine qua non for preventive action, but the intelligence community's track record with regard to weapons of mass destruction is, at best, mixed.

Time is a critical factor in assessing prospects for successful prevention. For example, is the intelligence picture getting better or worse with the passage of time? Is there an optimal moment to strike Iran's nuclear facilities? The U.S. military also needs the right tools if it seeks to target buried, hardened facilities. Some have argued that such

structures cannot be destroyed without resorting to nuclear weapons, but the military is currently testing a massive conventional penetrator that may be able to do the job.

As for deterrence, an approach based on that concept entails several deferred risks, including Iranian sharing of nuclear technology, the wider nuclearization of the region, and the possibility that a catastrophic deterrence failure could lead to the deaths of tens or hundreds of thousands. In this regard, it is instructive to look at the impact that nuclear weapons acquisition has had on the conduct of states in the past. According to one school of thought, such acquisition induces prudence and caution, with the Cold War serving as a prime example. But the Cuban Missile Crisis shows how close the nuclear superpowers were to all-out war, with luck playing a major role in defusing a potentially catastrophic situation.

Others maintain that acquiring nuclear weapons induces aggressive behavior and complicates deterrence. Such is the case with Pakistan -- after testing a nuclear device in 1998, the country launched an attack on Indian-held Kashmir in 1999 and provided safe haven to militants responsible for attacking the Indian parliament in 2001. Indeed, deterrence cannot eliminate the potential for miscalculation by Iran's leadership. Given the tepid U.S. action against Iran in the past, the regime likely believes that it can get away with aggressive actions without incurring significant risks. This fact could lead Tehran to take reckless risks.

Overall, the risks and uncertainties associated with both prevention and deterrence suggest that the United States should redouble its efforts to achieve a diplomatic outcome to the Iranian nuclear situation. Otherwise, it will be left with unpalatable options that rely on military measures.

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