



University of Pittsburgh
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for International Security Studies

HITTING FIRST: PREVENTIVE FORCE IN U.S. SECURITY POLICY

Major Findings

The central mission of this project is to analyze – from a multidisciplinary perspective – the history, rhetoric, ethics, material requirements and political implications of a national security strategy that openly asserts a right to attack enemies even if they do not pose an imminent threat.

1. **Preemptive force differs from preventive force.** Preemption is self-defense in the face of an imminent threat; prevention involves an elective military strike to counter less certain dangers. Blurring this distinction can generate political support for naked aggression.
2. **The development of preventive force doctrine as military strategy predates 9/11.** Precursors to the 2002 National Security Strategy of the United States can be found in the Cold War, long-term trends in international peacekeeping, and think-tank strategy blueprints from the 1990s.
3. **The track record for the use of preventive force in neutralizing nuclear, biological and chemical weapons is weak.** Of the 24 preventive attacks on record, limited strikes have failed to eliminate unconventional weapons, while regime change operations tend to entail massive, unanticipated costs.
4. **Preventive strikes may at first appear effective, but full evaluation often reveals flawed assumptions and negative results.** The 1981 Israeli attack on the Osiraq nuclear reactor, for example, drove the program underground, accelerating Iraq's drive to develop nuclear weapons. Similarly, preventive military intervention may result in regime change, but durable policy success typically requires long-term commitment to costly post-war reconstruction.
5. **Near-perfect intelligence is necessary for successful preventive attack missions.** However, the imperfect nature and structural limitations of intelligence tradecraft often confound efforts to determine when, where and how to apply preventive military force.
6. **The 2003 Iraq prewar intelligence failure is only partly attributable to the Intelligence Community.** The faulty assumptions that Iraq possessed "weapons of mass destruction" and collaborated with al-Qaida also involved systematic subversion of the intelligence function by political authorities, and a failure by the media and citizens to correct misleading political discourse in real time.
7. **While prevention is an important instrument of national security strategy, it has severe limitations when imposed by force.** More promising is a layered approach that sharply delineates diplomatic and military policy tracks, giving priority to non-violent forms of prevention such as rigorous inspections, treaties, law enforcement and economic leverage.