

# *U.S. Supremacism and Weapons of Mass Destruction in the 21st Century*

By Michael T. Klare

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The problem of Weapons of Mass Destruction must always be addressed on two levels. On one level, we find the scientific and technical aspects of WMD—their design, fabrication, and destructive effects. To a great degree, discussion on this level entails an understanding of the physical, chemical, and biological properties of WMD. On the other level, we have the political and strategic aspects of WMD. This entails an analysis of international power relations and the political dynamics underlying decisions on the manufacture, deployment, and actual use of WMD.

Both of these discussions are critical for understanding the role and menace of WMD of any point in time, and for devising strategies to prevent their proliferation and use. But my expertise lies in the second level, so I will concentrate on that arena in my remarks. What I hope to communicate tonight is that there has been a profound change in the parameters of this second level of analysis. What was true during the cold war era no longer applies, and what we face today is a new reality that is every bit as challenging and worrisome as that which we faced during the cold war. If we are to succeed in reducing the risk of WMD use, we must come to grips with this new reality.

## **Bipolarity and Decolonization**

How would I describe this shift from one reality to another? To summarize my argument: I would argue that the distinctive features of the cold war era were bipolarity (or U.S.-Soviet competition) and decolonization, or the emergence of the third world into international affairs. By comparison, the distinctive features of the current era are unipolarity (or America's sole superpower status) and economic globalization, or the spread of market dynamics to all areas of the world. As we shall see, this shift has enormous implications for the discussion of WMD.

To appreciate this, we need to look first at the dynamics of the cold war era. During the cold war, it

was the hostility and competition between the U.S. and the U.S.S.R that governed the WMD equation. I know I don't have to spell this out for you, but suffice it to say that each side in this contest sought to acquire sufficient military might to overpower the other, and this led to an unending arms race in which both superpowers sought weapons of ever greater lethality and destructiveness—a process that inevitably favored the development of nuclear, chemical, and biological weapons.

Now, this competition ultimately turned out to have a very paradoxical effect. On one hand, the dynamics of the arms race led to the manufacture and deployment of weapons of ever greater destructiveness, eventually reaching the point where the very survival of human life was in jeopardy, a situation described with devastating effect by Jonathan Schell in his famous book, *The Fate of the Earth*. At the same time, however, the very risk of Armageddon led the two superpowers to seek controls on the design and deployment of nuclear systems, so as to reduce the danger of their unintended or uncontrolled use. In attempting to forge these restraints, moreover, the two superpowers were aided by the very nature of bipolarity: since the two sides faced an equal risk of extinction from any nuclear encounters, and since neither enjoyed an overwhelming advantage in offensive firepower, it was possible to conceive of arrangements that called for equal or equivalent restrictions on each side, as manifest in the ABM Treaty and the various SALT and START agreements. This point is critical, although it was not obvious at the time: while bipolarity was at times an engine of the arms race, it also provided a framework for imposing significant restrictions on nuclear weapons.

Now, before I turn to the current era, let me say a few words about the second major feature of the cold war era, decolonization and the emergence of the third world. As nations became independent, they usually established armies of their own, and, in many

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areas, entered into regional power struggles with other developing countries. Eventually, these local rivalries became enmeshed in the global competition between the U.S. and the U.S.S.R., leading, in all too many cases, to the spread of WMD technology. But here, too, we see the paradox of bipolarity. Because the two superpowers were often fearful that a local conflict would trigger a global nuclear exchange, they were sometimes willing to work together to curb the proliferation of WMD. And so we had the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty (NPT), the Biological Weapons Convention (BWC), and the Chemical Weapons Convention (CWC).

Well, this was the situation during the cold war era. When the cold war ended, of course, the situation changed dramatically. The end of U.S.-Soviet competition halted the arms race between the U.S. and the U.S.S.R., and greatly reduced the risk of a superpower nuclear exchange. For this, we are exceedingly grateful. But, the end of the cold war also left the former Soviet Union with a vast accumulation of WMD materials and know-how—a warehouse of dangerous capabilities that can all too easily fall into the hands of black-market dealers. The end of the cold war has also released many local rivalries in the third world from the heavy hands of superpower oversight, allowing them to evolve in new and often dangerous ways—a trend seen with particular severity in South Asia.

So, while the end of the cold war has proved felicitous in certain respects, it has also bequeathed to us a number of very serious problems. Dealing with these problems will present us with an enormous challenge for years to come. I truly wish that was all we had to deal with. But I fear that we also have to address a whole range of new problems, rising from the destructive features of the new international landscape.

## Unipolarity and Economic Globalization

So let us turn now to this new international environment. If bipolarity and decolonization were the dominant features of the cold war era, then unipolarity and economic globalization are the dominant features of the current era. And just as the first pair of factors influenced WMD developments during the earlier period, unipolarity and globalization are shaping the WMD environment of this period. Unfortunately, I believe that we're much more knowledgeable about the WMD dynamics of the cold war era than of the present, and so I'd like to use the rest of my time to sketch out the implications of unipolarity and globalization for WMD dynamics in the future.

The most important of these for our discussion is, of course, unipolarity, or the emergence of the United States as the world's sole superpower. This is a situation that is truly unprecedented in recent times. Indeed, I think you have to go back to the Roman period to find an era in which one country so completely dominated the military landscape of the time.

Now, I don't think that American leaders set out to achieve this extraordinary condition. Rather, they sought to accumulate sufficient power to overwhelm the Soviet Union. But when the Soviet Union collapsed, the United States stood alone as a global military power, and no other country has emerged as an equal challenger since then. And it does not look as if such a challenger will arise any time soon. So it seems likely that the United States will remain the world's sole superpower for some time to come.

It is easy to view this as a temporary phenomenon, to be replaced by something more familiar to us from the cold war era. But I don't think this will occur anytime soon. Instead, I believe that unipolarity will remain the dominant reality for the foreseeable future. And even if there were any doubt about this,

U.S. leaders are determined to make unipolarity a permanent fact of life, through whatever means necessary. You can see hints of this outlook in the Clinton era, but it is really in the Bush administration that you see an explicit drive for permanent military supremacy.

When President Bush and Secretary of Defense Donald Rumsfeld talk about the “transformation” of the U.S. military establishment, they mean the acquisition of weapons and technologies that will ensure U.S. dominance over any conceivable adversary, now and far into the future. You can’t really appreciate the military thinking of the Bush administration without grasping this essential precept. To give you just a flavor of what I’m talking about, let me quote from President Bush’s most important pre-election speech, his Sept. 23, 1999 address at the Citadel in South Carolina. “My goal,” he said, “is to take advantage of the tremendous opportunity—given to few nations—to extend the current peace into the far realm of the future. A chance to protect America’s peaceful influence, not just across the world but across the years.” Now, this may strike some of you as sheer hubris, or worse, but it accurately describes the outlook of the current administration. As I will try to argue, moreover, it has important ramifications for U.S. nuclear weapons policy and for the future dynamics of WMD.

So, what are these ramifications? To begin with, this outlook rests on the presumption that the United States will retain the world’s most powerful and versatile nuclear strike force for as long into the future as we can see. When all is said and done, nuclear superiority is the bedrock of U.S. military policy. Now, I know that President Bush says that we can get by with fewer nuclear weapons than were needed during the cold war era. But this does not mean that he or his associates believe that nuclear weapons have lost their central importance to U.S. strategy. Rather, what they’re saying is that with the collapse of the Soviet Union, the United States can enjoy nuclear superiority with a

smaller arsenal than before. He now says we can maintain effective nuclear supremacy with between 1700-2200 operational nuclear warheads—but he’s not even willing to sign an agreement with Russia to this effect, in case he determines that a larger number is required.

Now, I think that we can all agree that 1700 or 2200 nuclear warheads is preferable to the current U.S. inventory of about 5,000 warheads. But I also suspect that we all want to believe that this is but a way-station on the road to a much smaller number, eventually reaching zero. This is not, however, the thinking of the Bush administration. From their point of view, 1700 or 2200 is the minimum number needed to retain military superiority over all current or imagined adversaries and they have no plans to go below this number.

## National Missile Defense

The next aspect of this that requires our attention is the matter of NMD—national missile defense.

I do not believe that you can really understand the administration’s passionate commitment to NMD unless you understand the strategy of supremacy, or the pursuit of permanent unipolar dominance. NMD is not about today or tomorrow. It is not about the handful of missiles that the so-called rogue states may be able to fire at us in five or ten years time. It’s about the attainment of effective invulnerability to any future adversary.

Here, for example, is how the Department of Defense talks about NMD in the new QDR, released Sept. 30, 2001: “The Department of Defense has refocused and revitalized the missile defense program, shifting from a single-site ‘national’ missile defense approach [as proposed by the Clinton administration] to a broad-based research, development, and testing effort aimed at deployment of layered missile defenses. These changes in the missile defense program will permit the exploration

of many previously untested technologies and approaches that will produce defenses able to intercept missiles of various ranges and in various phases of flight.”

This is not a limited, short-term program but an ambitious, long-term effort aimed at deploying a missile shield that will be effective not only against rogue-state missiles but against Chinese and Russian weapons as well.

And there’s a third aspect of the administration’s approach that must be mentioned here, and that’s the prospective use of U.S. military power in a preemptive mode, to destroy an enemy’s WMD capabilities before they’re used in combat. It’s very clear that the Bush Administration believes that it has public support for actions of this sort, if it can claim that a potential adversary may even be contemplating WMD strikes on the U.S. or its allies. Indeed, I think it likely that President Bush will order such strikes against Iraq in the very near future.

## 9-11 Reinforced Strategy of Supremacy

Before discussing the implications of all this for global WMD dynamics, let me raise the question of whether anything has changed as a result of 9-11. The answer, I think, is no—if anything, the attacks of Sept 11 have reinforced the administration’s commitment to a strategy of supremacy. It’s true, of course, that President Bush has attempted to promote warmer relations with Russia. But when push came to shove, Bush was unwilling to modify any of the policies I described above in order to gain President Putin’s acquiescence to changes in the ABM Treaty. So I don’t really see any major changes, except, perhaps, for a greater willingness to engage in preemptive military strikes.

So, what are the implications of all this for the future of WMD?

The first, I believe, is the total rejection of arms control agreements of the SALT and START variety. These agreements, after all,

were predicated on the situation of essential equivalence in nuclear firepower between the U.S. and the U.S.S.R. But no such equivalence exists today—the Russians are in no position to maintain their nuclear capability at anything approaching the scale of the Soviet arsenal, and certainly cannot keep up with the U.S. in technological advances. So the U.S. has no incentive to negotiate mutually restrictive agreements. From now on, Washington will only sign accords that perpetuate America's overwhelming superiority. But why would Russia—or anyone else, for that matter—agree to such an arrangement? I can't imagine that any Russian or Chinese leader could sign such an accord. So I find it hard to believe that we will see any more arms control agreements of the sort we became accustomed to in the past.

The second implication is far more troubling. What will happen when we face a situation where the U.S. possesses a powerful nuclear arsenal and has deployed a multilayered NMD system, making it seemingly invulnerable to an enemy counter attack. There are many in Washington who believe that this will be a more peaceful and stable world, because no one will be willing to provoke U.S. hostility by challenging our global interests. Perhaps this is so. This is such a unique situation in human history that it is hard to imagine what will transpire. Nevertheless, I am skeptical that the world will be conflict-free in such an environment. If human history is any guide to this new era, I think we can expect continuing challenges to U.S. hegemony, taking many different forms.

## Sense of Invulnerability Will Lead to New Interventions

I fear that faith in U.S. invulnerability, whether justified or not, will lead U.S. leaders to engage in periodic interventions of one sort or another. So I predict that we will see continuing conflict in this brave new world. And I also believe that one of the responses to U.S. superiority will be

the continuing pursuit of WMD by potential challengers. After all, if we insist that possession of a massive nuclear arsenal is the bedrock of the U.S. military preponderance, we can hardly be surprised if other states will seek to copy us. Russia and China, I suspect, will seek to overcome the U.S. advantage in missile defense by expanding the size and potency of their nuclear arsenal, and by developing anti-NMD countermeasures—multiple warheads, decoys, and so forth. Other countries, lacking the capacity to manufacture nuclear weapons, will develop chemical and biological weapons, along with unconventional means of delivery. The recent anthrax scare shows us just how easily this can be done. So, in the end, I believe that U.S. efforts to preserve unipolarity forever will only lead to the spread of WMD and the emergence of new threats to global peace and security.

## Economic Globalization

This is where the second major trend of the current era, economic globalization, enters the picture. I obviously cannot devote much time to this, but I think that you're well aware that globalization will have profound effects on the world situation. And among its effects will be a greater fluidity in the international diffusion of all kinds of technology, including biotech and pharmaceutical technologies that can be harnessed for the production of chemical and biological weapons. And globalization has other effects that bear on the larger military equation. In particular, it is generating anti-Americanism in many areas, where the negative consequences of globalization outweigh the positive effects. So you have a situation where it is generating conflict and at the same time facilitating the spread of WMD technology.

## Conclusions

Well, let me try now to summarize all this and to draw some conclusions.

If my analysis is correct, we have to work on two fronts at the same time. We have to

deal as best we can with the legacies of the cold war, and try to diminish the risk that surplus nuclear materials and know-how from the former Soviet Union will be funneled to potential belligerents in other areas. The same is true of the chemical and biological warfare capabilities of the former Soviet Union. And there are other legacies of the cold war that will require our attention for a long time to come.

At the same time, however, it is obvious that we face a whole raft of new problems arising from the effects of unipolarity and globalization. In particular, we have to address the destabilizing effects of America's search for permanent military superiority. In fact, I think this will be the hardest task we face. It will be very difficult to convince the American people that the pursuit of permanent superiority can bring new dangers along with the appearance of heightened security. We have to be very careful in how we approach all this. American preponderance is not necessarily a bad thing in itself.

If we use that preponderance to promote global peace and justice, and assist in the construction of robust international norms and institutions, we can help make the world a better and safer place. But if we allow American leaders to use all of their power for narrow and selfish purposes, U.S. preponderance will generate widespread resentment to the U.S.A.—some of it violent—and will undermine international efforts to curb the spread of WMD. Convincing people of this will, I believe, be our most important task in the years and decades to come. Just how all this will work out cannot be foreseen. But as citizens of the world's most wealthy and powerful nation, we have a special responsibility to ensure that this power is used for the good of all, and not to impose a Pax Americana on an unwelcoming world.

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