



# Dealing with the Collapse of a Nuclear-Armed State

## The Cases of North Korea and Pakistan

Michael O'Hanlon

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Michael O'Hanlon

**M**ichael E. O'Hanlon is a Senior Fellow in Foreign Policy Studies and The Sydney Stein, Jr. Chair at the Brookings Institution. He is also a Visiting Lecturer of Public and International Affairs at the Woodrow Wilson School at Princeton University. He has held positions with the Congressional Budget Office, the Institute for Defense Analyses, and the Peace Corps. He received his A.B., M.S.E., M.A. and Ph.D. from Princeton University. Recent publications include *Defense Strategy for the Post-Saddam Era* (2005), *Crisis on the Korean Peninsula: How to Deal with a Nuclear North Korea*, with Mike Mochizuki (2003), *Protecting the American Homeland: One Year On*, with Peter Orszag, Ivo Daalder, I.M. Destler, David Gunter, Robert Litan, and James Steinberg (2003), and *Expanding Global Military Capacity for Humanitarian Intervention* (2003). He has a forthcoming book with Kurt Campbell, entitled *Hard Power: The New Politics of National Security* (Basic, 2006).

Few dangers in the 21<sup>st</sup> century could compete with the altogether too plausible scenario in which a nuclear-armed state collapses, with the custody of its weapons immediately becoming a national security threat of the highest order to the United States and some of its allies. In fact, there is a strong case that in the post-Cold War and post-9/11 world, this danger is the single greatest existential threat to Western survival: the chances of nuclear war between the United States and Russia are now very low; those between the United States and China are nontrivial but limited; and the chances that al Qaeda or a related terrorist organization could develop its own nuclear arms are also very small. However, if a terrorist group somehow got its hands on one or more nuclear arms, it could pose an extraordinary risk to the United States and other internationally prominent Western countries with controversial foreign policies, such as the United Kingdom. The most likely path to such a situation may well be the collapse of a nuclear-armed country, in all likelihood Pakistan or North Korea given their fragile politics, and the subsequent purchase or confiscation of nuclear weapons by a terrorist group in the anarchical environment that ensued.

This paper addresses such a scenario and explores what the United States and its allies might do to contain it. It considers both the immediate risks associated with the nuclear weapons in the two countries under such circumstances, as well as the broader risks and challenges associated with attempts to stabilize the countries and their political systems once the immediate danger of loose nuclear arms has passed. The first issue requires analysis of the rapid response options available to South Korea, India, the United States, or other countries to address specific sites that may hold nuclear materials, and the military options for more generally restoring order in either country. The second involves questions such as: Can the United States expect much help from allies in large stabilization missions? Should it develop dedicated units committed to stabilization and nation-building tasks?

## RESPONDING TO A COLLAPSE OF NORTH KOREA OR PAKISTAN: MILITARY OPTIONS

In postulating a collapse of a nuclear-armed state, two key questions arise. First, what can be done about the nuclear weapons and related materials and technologies themselves in such a situation? And second, assuming the answer to the first question is not encouraging, what military options exist for a brute-force operation to restore order and stability countrywide, in the hope that doing so will eventually allow dangerous nuclear capabilities to be located and secured?

This section of the essay proceeds as follows. First, it attempts to develop some general principles for understanding military options in the event of a state collapse with particular emphasis on the lessons of the recent experience in Iraq – albeit a situation in which state collapse was caused by outside action, not internal dynamics. To account for the different possible circumstances arising from an internal collapse, and to consider the specific situations of North Korea and South Asia, this section then turns to those two regions in particular.

The essay's next main section addresses some of the broader policy issues arising from consideration of the specific scenarios. Specifically, should the United States rebuild its military to account for the potentially greater frequency and scale of stabilization missions in the current international environment? Should it develop dedicated units for such missions? And to what extent can it expect allied help in these kinds of operations?

### The Lessons from Iraq

The recent experience in overthrowing Saddam Hussein's regime, for the alleged purpose of eliminating his weapons of mass destruction (WMD) capabilities, is a good place to begin this discussion because it highlights the capabilities and the limitations of U.S. military power.

Of course, in this situation there had been no breakdown of order prior to the Coalition's invasion, and as it turned out there were no weapons of mass destruction. Despite intensive focus on Iraq for more than a decade and the presence of weapons inspectors for nearly a decade, U.S. intelligence was unable to render an accurate verdict on the WMD issue. This failure reflects a broader, albeit rather obvious, reality: WMD technologies are sufficiently compact that they cannot be easily identified by remote reconnaissance. Nuclear reactors can be seen, as can cooling ponds and reprocessing facilities; however, smaller centrifuge complexes to enrich uranium and separated nuclear materials or even weapons themselves are far too small and give off far too weak a radioactive signature to be detected by

long-range sensors. (In Iran, much of the information has come from internal dissident groups.)

It is worth retracing several aspects of the Iraq war experience for their specific lessons to the issue at hand. In particular, the concept of "shock and awe," as well as the role played by Coalition special forces in Iraq, are relevant when assessing what capabilities the United States and its allies would have for rapid response elsewhere. Additionally, several other characteristics of the war experience help illuminate the issues involved in brute-force stabilization missions.

### *Shock and awe*

This was, of course, the bumper sticker for how the war would begin, well advertised weeks in advance. The idea was actually not so new. Striking hard in a war's early hours is a strategy that air power proponents have counseled for decades. Selectively hitting military targets while sparing civilian infrastructure is an idea that builds on the U.S. experiences in Afghanistan, Kosovo, and Desert Storm. In the end, the shock-and-awe concept was not really followed because plans apparently changed with the attempt to kill Saddam Hussein on March 19, 2003. Given the degree to which Iraqi forces grew accustomed to Coalition bombing in the preceding decade, there probably would not have been much shock or awe in any case.

Things could be different in a country that did not expect a U.S. attack. In the situation of that country's collapse, however, attacks on military command and control would likely have little utility. An effective strike would require knowledge of where actual nuclear facilities and materials were located. The broad point is that it would not be hard to destroy known production infrastructure, but it would be quite hard to destroy weapons since the United States would need accurate information about their location. Both these assumptions would likely hinge on security forces in the country in question sharing the U.S. view that destruction of these weapons was a top priority. Otherwise, Washington presumably would not gain information about the weapons' whereabouts. Even if it did, the weapons could very well be moved in the few hours that it would (at a minimum) take U.S. forces to get in position to attack.

### *Special Operations raids*

These were impressive in the Iraq war. Dozens of small Special Operations teams disrupted Iraqi command and control, seized oil infrastructure, prevented dams from being demolished, and took hold

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of airfields in regions where Scud missiles might have been launched at Israel. Special Operations and intelligence units also appear to have disrupted Iraqi lines of communication in Baghdad and elsewhere, perhaps hastening the collapse of Iraqi forces once the urban fights began. These operations were brave, creative, and effective. They also prevented some nightmare scenarios; in the north and west of Iraq, for example, small teams of Special Forces helped hold off much larger Iraqi main combat formations at key moments.<sup>1</sup>

The Special Forces teams in Iraq were never far from reinforcement by heavy American forces, and they had large amounts of U.S. airpower immediately available to back them up. In addition, since the United States chose the time to initiate conflict, they could be comfortably pre-positioned, first in the region and then within Iraq, before acting. Otherwise, it could have taken several days to move them from facilities in the United States to where they needed to be. (In Afghanistan in 2001, it generally took weeks to accomplish this task). In addition, they did not attack the centers of national military power in the capital city or at large military bases.

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On balance, considering the above lessons from Iraq, it is difficult to assume that a surgical or limited operation could neutralize nuclear weapons in the early hours or days of a collapse scenario. This conclusion leads to an examination of two other aspects of the Iraq experience that have more bearing on large-scale operations to impose stability throughout a country.

#### *Bypassing southeastern cities while rushing to Baghdad*

In the war's first ten days, it was not clear that Coalition ground forces could sufficiently protect their flanks in areas that they preferred not to seize. The ensuing debate was somewhat overblown. In the worst case, Coalition forces could have waited a couple of weeks for other units to arrive with, in all likelihood, only modest harm done to the broader strategy. (Admittedly, Saddam Hussein would have had more time to consider steps like blowing up dams or fortifying Baghdad in the event of such delays, but he had some time to employ these kinds of tactics even as things unfolded and, still, he made little use of them.)

However, in a stabilization mission, even if forces can move quickly once deployed to the country in

<sup>1</sup> Andrew F. Krepinevich, *Operation Iraqi Freedom: A First-Blush Assessment* (Washington, D.C.: Center for Strategic and Budgetary Assessments, 2003), 18-19.

question, it will take time to deploy them from the United States and other participating countries; therefore, it would take considerable time to consolidate control of a country, probably extending to many weeks or months in most cases.

#### *The fights for Baghdad and Basra*

The Coalition effectively established control over parts of Iraq's major cities in a matter of days. To have tried to seize the cities even more quickly probably would have produced high casualties on all sides. By contrast, to have waited patiently for the 4th Mechanized Infantry Division and other reinforcements would have given Saddam Hussein's forces the confidence, as well as the time, to regroup and devise new tactics. So the middle ground – using increasingly assertive “reconnaissance in force” operations to gain information, disrupt Saddam Hussein's forces, and engage selectively in firefights against elite Iraqi forces – was just right. With its wide boulevards, the topography of Baghdad helped; the disorganized and ineffective nature of Iraqi fighters helped even more. So as Anthony Cordesman underscores, one should not assume that future urban operations would be so straightforward; indeed, the post-invasion experience in Iraq itself has already taught that lesson. Still, a combination of American Army and Marine Corps infantry skills, the combat setting, and Iraqi fecklessness made for a quick, decisive urban fight.<sup>2</sup> The British were every bit as effective in Basra using a similar approach.<sup>3</sup>

In addition to high-technology weaponry, the global transportation capability used to deploy forces to the theater quickly was also quite impressive, even if the process of computerizing and tagging shipments was still badly incomplete<sup>4</sup>. In particular, C-17 aircraft and Large, Medium-Speed, Roll-on/Roll-off (LMSR) fast sealift ships purchased during the Clinton administration performed quite effectively.<sup>5</sup> Both the competence of American and British troops and commanders, and the excellence of their doctrine and training were impressive. Indeed, conventional equipment such as tanks performed extremely well; the old-fashioned skills of infantry soldiers were very important; and, overall, urban combat operations were executed magnificently. These observations suggest that Western main combat forces are not badly suited to establishing order in a chaotic country, but because of the heaviness and size of such forces, they also underscore the point made earlier – reestablishing even a semblance of order in a collapsed country takes a good deal of time.

Of course, stability was hardly established quickly throughout all of Iraq's major cities, and chaos reigned

<sup>2</sup> Anthony H. Cordesman, *The Iraq War: Strategy, Tactics, and Military Lessons* (Washington, D.C.: Center for Strategic and International Studies, 2003), 365-367; Eric Schmitt, “In Iraq's Murky Battle, Snipers Offer U.S. A Precision Weapon,” *New York Times*, January 2, 2004.

<sup>3</sup> See John Keegan, *The Iraq War* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 2004), 165-219.

<sup>4</sup> General Accounting Office, *Defense Logistics: Preliminary Observations on the Effectiveness of Logistics Activities during Operation Iraqi Freedom*, GAO-04-305R (December 2003), 1-5.

<sup>5</sup> See J.R. Wilson, “Logistics Fixes That Took Root,” *Armed Forces Journal* (October 2003), 44-50.

in much of the country for many days after Baghdad fell. The Coalition simply was not prepared to do the job of pacifying and controlling the country once organized resistance to its presence collapsed.

Optimistic assumptions that the conventional military would not resist for long proved largely right; however, optimistic assumptions that Iraqi armed forces and other elements of the Iraqi security services would be available quickly to help stabilize the country proved very wrong.<sup>6</sup> So, therefore, did administration expectations that initial U.S. troop levels in Iraq could be cut by fifty thousand within three months and by another fifty thousand shortly thereafter, with virtually all coming home within the first year.<sup>7</sup>

Before the invasion, Army General Eric K. Shinseki said that stabilizing Iraq could require “several hundred thousand” outside troops. Defense Secretary Donald H. Rumsfeld and Deputy Secretary Paul D. Wolfowitz objected and deployed roughly half that number, or about one hundred fifty thousand. That number seems inadequate, and most analysts were critical of them for low-balling requirements. As a result, some key missions, such as safeguarding ammunition sites and preventing post-invasion looting, were not conducted for lack of troops. Whoever was right, Iraq helps provide a benchmark for scaling: somewhere between one hundred fifty thousand and three hundred thousand foreign troops, and more realistically two hundred thousand to three hundred thousand, are required to stabilize a country of twenty-five million. When considering operations in North Korea, which has a population of about twenty-five million itself, assume a similar range of forces (though most might be South Korean in that instance). When considering Pakistan, with a population of about one hundred and fifty million, these numbers would likely have to be scaled up by a factor of five or more.

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Finally, it is indefensible to undertake regime change without anticipating and planning for a difficult post-conflict environment, as many had warned before the war. It is hard to assess the extent to which mistakes made early in the post-Saddam Hussein period have contributed to the difficult environment that persists today. Undoubtedly, they played a role in breeding cynicism among the Iraqi population about the U.S.-led foreign forces’ commitment to their well-being

<sup>6</sup> For the Army history, see Gregory Fontenot, E.J. Degen, and David Tohn, *On Point: The United States Army in Operation Iraqi Freedom* (Fort Leavenworth, Kansas: Combat Studies Institute Press, 2004), 42-84

<sup>7</sup> Based on a quote from then-Army Secretary Thomas White in Michael R. Gordon, “The Strategy to Secure Iraq Did Not Foresee a 2nd War,” *New York Times*, October 19, 2004.

and in allowing insurgents to regroup and recover.<sup>8</sup> This comment is not meant to vilify the Bush administration or the Pentagon, but rather to underscore an important point. Excellent forces alone are not sufficient; excellent plans for their use are needed too, and in a collapse scenario, there will not be time to create them once they are needed. They must be created in advance, despite the political sensitivity of doing so.

## War (and South Korean-Led Occupation) Against North Korea

Many at the Pentagon have long believed a surprise North Korean attack on South Korea could achieve important objectives – quite possibly including the capture of Seoul – before U.S. reinforcements arrived in sufficient numbers to work with surviving Republic of Korea (ROK) troops to stop and then reverse the onslaught. Given the continued improvements in South Korean and U.S. capabilities, combined with the gradual atrophy of the Democratic Peoples Republic of Korea (DPRK) military, allied prospects for successfully defending ROK territory appear rather good today and are likely to remain quite good in the future.

Still, the United States cannot neglect North Korea in its war planning and force structure analyses. An escalating crisis over nuclear weapons could lead to war. That could happen if the United States and its allies grew acutely worried that North Korea might sell nuclear materials abroad, or if they decided that Pyongyang must be prevented from developing a large nuclear arsenal. It could also happen if North Korea miscalculated the new leverage its nuclear capabilities afforded it and pushed brinkmanship too far.<sup>9</sup> Finally, for the purposes of this discussion, it could happen if North Korea began to fissure. Among the most difficult scenarios would be one in which some fraction of the DPRK military held together and offered resistance against allied entrance into their country, while other parts of the country (notably, those with the nuclear weapons) began to fall apart, calling the security of the nuclear arms into doubt.

Would a war on the peninsula lead to many hundreds of thousands of military and civilian casualties, or might it be won more quickly and decisively using innovative war plans and new technologies?

<sup>8</sup> Frederick W. Kagan, “War and Aftermath,” *Policy Review* (August/September 2003): 3-27.

<sup>9</sup> Reportedly, Pentagon models estimate about 50,000 U.S. and 500,000 South Korean military casualties during the first three months of war. See Don Oberdorfer, “A Minute to Midnight,” *Newsweek*, October 20, 1997.

There are several pertinent questions. First, would a war on the peninsula lead to many hundreds of thousands of military and civilian casualties, or might it be won more quickly and decisively using innovative war plans and new technologies? Second, Pentagon planners have estimated the U.S. forces needed for the defense and ultimate liberation of the ROK to be roughly six ground combat divisions, including Marine and Army units, ten Air Force aircraft wings, and four to five Navy aircraft carrier battle groups – altogether totaling at least half a million Americans under arms. Are these estimates still valid, and are they valid for a case of North Korean regime collapse rather than aggression?<sup>10</sup> If so, any war on the Korean Peninsula would require months to resolve, since it would take that long to deploy sufficient American capability.

Although U.S. defense reviews in the 1990s conceptually lumped Korea with Southwest Asia, the peninsula is much more like a cross between the former intra-German border and Bosnia than like Kuwait, Saudi Arabia, or southern Iraq. That image applies to both the nature of the terrain and the nature of the fighting forces deployed in the vicinity. Indeed, the Korean Peninsula remains the world's most densely militarized region. North Korean forces of about one million (with a defense budget that may exceed 25 percent of GDP and even approach 40 percent) face off against combined allied forces of about six hundred thousand.<sup>11</sup> Tens of thousands of pieces of heavy equipment are deployed as well – some two-thirds within several tens of kilometers of the Demilitarized Zone (DMZ). The Korean Peninsula as a whole is roughly two hundred fifty kilometers wide at its waist and about one thousand kilometers long. It is characterized by very hilly topography; what flat land exists is mostly marsh or rice fields. Significantly more than one million troops and twenty thousand armored vehicles or artillery pieces, and more than one million land mines, abundant chemical weapons, and fortified defensive positions, are found between Pyongyang and Seoul. (The distance from the four-kilometer-wide DMZ to Seoul is roughly forty kilometers, and that from the DMZ to Pyongyang about one hundred twenty-five kilometers.) Forces in Korea are more densely concentrated than Warsaw Pact and NATO units were in Central Europe during the Cold War. For North Korea, in fact, roughly 65 percent of its total units and up to 80 percent of its estimated aggregate firepower are within one hundred kilometers of the DMZ – all are significantly greater fractions than in the 1980s.<sup>12</sup>

<sup>10</sup> Secretary of Defense Les Aspin, *Report on the Bottom-Up Review* (Washington, D.C.: U.S. Department of Defense, October 1993), 13-22; and Secretary of Defense William S. Cohen, *Report of the Quadrennial Defense Review* (Washington, D.C.: U.S. Department of Defense, May 1997): 1213, 24-26, 30.

<sup>11</sup> On North Korea's defense budget, see Bill Gertz, "North Korea Pumps Money Into Military," *Washington Times*, August 3, 2004.

<sup>12</sup> On the comparison with Europe, see, for example, Fran Lussier, *U.S. Ground Forces and the Conventional Balance in Europe* (Washington, D.C.: U.S. Congressional Budget Office, June 1988): 7-28, 91-99. About one-fourth of the total NATO and Warsaw Pact forces were either deployed in the Germany-Poland-Czechoslovakia area or immediately deployable to that zone using pre-positioned stocks. That made for a total of roughly 2.5 million troops and 60,000 armored vehicles in a zone with a front three times the length of the Korean DMZ—similar numbers, per kilometer of front, to what prevails near the DMZ. But forces in the Germanys, Poland, and Czechoslovakia were based as far away as 200 to 300 kilometers from the intra-German border, whereas most of those in the Koreas are within roughly 100 kilometers of the front. See also, James C. Wendt, "U.S. Conventional Arms Control for Korea: A Proposed Approach," *RAND Note*

A preemptive use of force by the ROK and the United States, even in response to a disintegrating North Korea, would encounter serious obstacles even above and beyond the challenge of deploying U.S. forces to the peninsula quickly. First, so many North Korean weapons are near Seoul, many in protected locations, that even a massive attack could not prevent thousands of explosive rounds launched by artillery tube or missile from landing in Seoul.<sup>13</sup> Second, many North Korean military and political headquarters are deep underground, thus making it hard to attack them even with a "shock and awe" air campaign. Virtually nothing is or will become known about the location of North Korean nuclear weapons – especially if they are not deployed on long-range missiles or aircraft – except that they are likely to be kept in such hardened sites. Given the degree to which the country is cut off from outsiders, U.S. Special Forces also would have a harder time infiltrating North Korea and locating such sites for aerial attack than in Iraq.

Virtually nothing is known, or likely to become known, about the location of North Korean nuclear weapons

Third, there is no easy axis of approach to Pyongyang similar to the open desert used by Coalition forces to race to Baghdad in March and April of 2003. Korea's terrain is difficult and complex. Among other implications, this suggests that the enemy harassment of supply lines – similar to that which Coalition forces faced at a few specific sites in Iraq – could be a more pervasive problem in any invasion of North Korea.

Fourth, North Korea's military, with total active-duty strength over (or at least near) one million, is much larger than Iraq's. Moreover, three-fourths of Iraq's troops were believed unlikely to fight hard before the war began; few make a similar assumption about North Korea's military.<sup>14</sup> No one can predict how this dynamic would play out in a collapse scenario. Perhaps only modest numbers of North Korean soldiers would remain in their units and fight hard against invading forces; perhaps much larger numbers would. Even in a collapse scenario, many North Korean soldiers would probably be more dependable and fiercer in battle than were most of Saddam Hussein's elite units, such as his Republican Guard, Special Republican Guard, presidential guards, and Fedayeen Saddam. Similar conclusions follow for North Korea's top military and political leadership, parts of which would likely

(Santa Monica, Calif.: RAND Corporation, 1993: 14; Oberdorfer, *The Two Koreas*, 313; and Defense Intelligence Agency, *North Korea: The Foundations for Military Strength, Update 1995* (Washington, D.C.: U.S. Defense Intelligence Agency, March 1996): 13.

<sup>13</sup> North Korea, as discussed elsewhere in this chapter, has about 500 artillery tubes within range of Seoul. Each could fire one or more rounds a minute at the South Korean capital over an extended period of time. Unless their locations were virtually all known in advance, permitting preemptive attack against these sites, U.S. and ROK forces would only be able to destroy them after observing the trajectories of shells launched by these artillery tubes and then firing weapons at them. Even in a best case for coalition forces, a typical North Korean weapon would be able to fire several shots before being destroyed.

<sup>14</sup> See "Lessons from the Iraq War: Strategy and Planning," *Strategic Comments*, vol. 9, issue 3 (May 2003).

fight against foreign forces even in a scenario in which Kim Jong-Il was overthrown and their country was dissembling before their eyes.<sup>15</sup> It is for these reasons that war simulations, even if inexact, predict hundreds of thousands of deaths in any future war on the Korean Peninsula, regardless of how it might start. The simulations probably exaggerate likely casualties, but only by a factor of two or three, not ten or twenty.

The last two arguments in particular have another set of implications. They mean that, in all likelihood, winning fast and decisively in North Korea would require hundreds of thousands of U.S. troops, in addition to the large ROK armed forces. It is worth reexamining the details of the war plan more rigorously than is possible here. However, a first-blush assessment suggests existing force requirements may not be far off.

Fortunately for the United States, any invasion into North Korea would be followed by an occupation that the South Koreans could handle largely on their own (unlike the situation in Iraq); however, creating the conditions for that occupation to occur could take considerable time and effort, resulting in great uncertainty over what would happen to North Korea's nuclear weapons in the interim. Only if North Korean collapse meant effective disintegration of the country could South Korean forces control the situation confidently, promptly, and without substantial American help. South Korea's active ground forces – well over half a million – are adequately sized for stabilizing a country of fewer than twenty-five million people, and most are routinely well-positioned near the DMZ. That said, most of these units are substantially less mobile than American combat forces. Most of all, the strength of any residual North Korean opposition cannot be easily forecast even in a collapse scenario. For this reason, the details of how the scenario would unfold are crucial and, alas, impossible to predict.

Only if North Korean collapse meant effective disintegration of the country could South Korean forces confidently control the situation promptly and without substantial American help.

<sup>15</sup> Such ideas have reportedly been investigated in regard to Korea (and Pyongyang surely has figured that out); see Thom Shanker, "Lessons from Iraq Include How to Scare North Korean Leader," *New York Times*, May 12, 2003.

## Preventing Nuclear Catastrophe in South Asia

Of all the military scenarios that undoubtedly would involve U.S. vital interests, a collapsed Pakistan ranks very high on the list. The combination of Islamic extremists and nuclear weapons in that country is extremely worrisome. Were parts of Pakistan's nuclear arsenal ever to fall into the wrong hands, al Qaeda could conceivably gain access to a nuclear device with terrifying possible results. Another quite worrisome South Asia scenario could involve another Indo-Pakistani crisis leading to war between the two nuclear-armed states over Kashmir, with the potential to destabilize Pakistan in the process.<sup>16</sup>

The Pakistani collapse scenario appears somewhat unlikely given its relatively pro-Western and secular officer corps;<sup>17</sup> however, the intelligence services, which created the Taliban and have condoned if not abetted Islamic extremists in Kashmir, are less dependable. The country as a whole is sufficiently infiltrated by fundamentalist groups – as the attempted assassinations against President Pervez Musharraf and other evidence make clear – that this terrifying scenario should not be dismissed.<sup>18</sup>

Were Pakistan to collapse, it is unclear what the United States and like-minded states would or should do. As with North Korea, it is highly unlikely that "surgical strikes" to destroy the nuclear weapons could be conducted before extremists could make a grab at them. The United States probably would not know their location – at a minimum, scores of sites controlled by Special Forces or elite Army units would be presumed candidates – and no Pakistani government would likely help external forces with targeting information. The chances of learning the locations would probably be greater than in the North Korean case, given the greater openness of Pakistani society and its ties with the outside world; but U.S.-Pakistani military cooperation, cut off for a decade in the 1990s, is still quite modest, and the likelihood that Washington would be provided such information or otherwise obtain it should be considered small.

Were parts of Pakistan's nuclear arsenal ever to fall into the wrong hands, al Qaeda could conceivably gain access to a nuclear device with terrifying possible results.

<sup>16</sup> See Sumit Ganguly, *Conflict Unending: India-Pakistan Tensions Since 1947* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2001).

<sup>17</sup> See Stephen Philip Cohen, *The Idea of Pakistan* (Washington, D.C.: Brookings, 2004), 97-130.

<sup>18</sup> See International Crisis Group, *Unfulfilled Promises: Pakistan's Failure to Tackle Extremism* (Brussels, 2004)



Given the enormous stakes, the United States would literally have to do anything it could to prevent nuclear weapons from getting into the wrong hands.

If a surgical strike, series of surgical strikes, or commando-style raids were not possible, the only option would be to try to restore order before the weapons could be taken by extremists and transferred to terrorists. The United States and other outside powers might, for example, respond to a request by the Pakistani government to help restore order. Given the embarrassment associated with requesting such outside help, the Pakistani

government might delay asking until quite late, thus complicating an already challenging operation. If the international community could act fast enough, it might help defeat an insurrection. Another option would be to protect Pakistan's borders, therefore making it harder to sneak nuclear weapons out of the country, while only providing technical support to the Pakistani armed forces as they tried to quell the insurrection. Given the enormous stakes, the United States would literally have to do anything it could to prevent nuclear weapons from getting into the wrong hands.

India would, of course, have a strong incentive to ensure the security of Pakistan's nuclear weapons. It also would have the advantage of proximity; it could undoubtedly mount a large response within a week, but its role would be complicated to say the least. In the case of a dissolved Pakistani state, India likely would not hesitate to intervene; however, in the more probable scenario in which Pakistan were fraying but not yet collapsed, India's intervention could unify Pakistan's factions against the invader, even leading to the deliberate use of Pakistani weapons against India. In such a scenario, with Pakistan's territorial integrity and sovereignty on the line and its weapons put into a "use or lose" state by the approach of the Indian Army, nuclear dangers have long been considered to run very high.

Should the immediate crisis somehow be resolved and stabilization efforts then required, the undertaking would be breathtaking in scale. Pakistan is a very large country: its population is over one hundred fifty million, or six times Iraq's; its land area is roughly twice that of Iraq; its perimeter is about fifty percent longer in total. Stabilizing a country of this size could easily require several times as many troops as the Iraq mission, and a figure of up to one million is plausible. India has that many ground troops in its military, but they are deployed widely throughout the country with limited capacity for quick movement, even within India. Furthermore, as noted, the politics of Indian intervention, even in a collapse scenario, could be quite incendiary.

Of course, any international force would have help. Presumably, some fraction of Pakistan's security forces would remain intact, able and willing to help defend their country. Pakistan's military includes five hundred fifty thousand Army troops, seventy thousand uniformed Air Force and Navy personnel, another five hundred ten thousand reservists, and almost three hundred thousand gendarmes and Interior Ministry troops.<sup>19</sup> Nevertheless, if some substantial fraction broke off from the military – say, a quarter to a third – and was assisted by extremist militias, it is quite possible the international community would need to deploy one hundred thousand to two hundred thousand troops to restore order quickly. Unless much of India's million-man army were available, the primary burden would, in all likelihood, fall upon the United States. The U.S. requirement could be as high as fifty thousand to one hundred thousand ground forces.

## FUTURE POLICY OPTIONS

The above analyses suggest several starting points for future force planning. First, surgical strikes to destroy nuclear weapons – with airpower or Special Forces – are the only types of missions that, in general, might be done fast enough to neutralize the risk of a nuclear stockpile before it could be moved; however, these strikes rely on exquisite intelligence. Second, in all but the smallest countries, stabilization missions to impose order and ensure control require months of preparation, due to the lengthy deployment time needed for ground troops and their equipment. Third, such missions can be huge in scale, especially in a country substantially larger than Iraq (such as Pakistan).

These generally discouraging observations beg the broader question: Might new military capabilities or configurations improve the situation? In fact, the U.S. Army is already restructuring for the new challenges it faces and may continue to face. Another option worth considering is whether to build dedicated forces for stabilization operations.

### Restructuring and Rebalancing the Total Army

Under Army Chief of Staff Peter Schoomaker's and Secretary of Defense Donald Rumsfeld's guidance, the Army has embarked on an ambitious plan to reassign many of its personnel over the rest of the decade. Units of lower expected utility on the modern battlefield will be eliminated in many cases to permit increases in those units heavily employed now and likely in the future. (In addition, in 2004 and

<sup>19</sup> International Institute for Strategic Studies, *The Military Balance 2003-2004*, 140-142.

2005, the Army converted some ten thousand military jobs to civilian positions, freeing up additional soldiers for high-demand tasks; this process continues.<sup>20</sup>) This idea, while bold, is not entirely new or radical. Even in the late 1990s, the Army's own war plans suggested it had one hundred fifty thousand too many combat troops (mostly in the National Guard) and fifty thousand too few support troops, indicating need for a major overhaul and rebalancing.<sup>21</sup>

Under the new plan, the Army will streamline its field artillery, air defense, engineer, and armor units substantially (reducing them by twenty-four, ten, eleven, and nineteen battalions, respectively). It will reassign many of these billets to augment specialties including transportation units, civil affairs, military police, and other commonly used assets.<sup>22</sup>

Special Operations forces will be expanded as well. Numbers will increase in civil affairs and psychological operations units, as well as commando teams and other combat formations. Currently, the Special Operations Command has jurisdiction over nearly thirty-five thousand active-duty troops, though only a few thousand of these are Special Forces of the combat variety. Overall, Special Operations forces will increase substantially – probably by several thousand – under the administration's plan. This makes sense, given that existing capabilities, for example, were not adequate to conduct the Afghanistan and Iraq missions robustly at the same time.<sup>23</sup>

Any expansion of Special Operations forces needs to be careful and gradual; sacrificing quality for quantity would be particularly ill-advised.<sup>24</sup> Most such jobs require unusual skills and place great demands on the individual. It is not clear the military can attract large additional numbers of the right people. Even then, training dropout rates can exceed 50 percent for many Special Operations units.<sup>25</sup>

Special Forces units are most effective when deployments can be quick, stealthy, and flexible. These attributes are harder to inculcate and display in a larger organization than a smaller one. Given that the U.S. Special Forces as a group is already comparable in size to an entire traditional military service of many allies' militaries, and several times its own size of a quarter century ago, any expansion should be

<sup>20</sup> Under Secretary of Defense David Chu, "How Might We Think About Stress on the Force?" Briefing at the Pentagon, February 11, 2004.

<sup>21</sup> Frances M. Lussier, *Structuring the Active and Reserve Army for the 21st Century* (Washington, D.C.: Congressional Budget Office, 1997), 11.

<sup>22</sup> See Eric Schmitt, "General Warns of a Looming Shortage of Specialists," *New York Times*, September 17, 2004.

<sup>23</sup> Barton Gellman and Dafna Linzer, "Afghanistan, Iraq: Two Wars Collide," *Washington Post*, October 22, 2004.

<sup>24</sup> Michael Fitzsimmons, "The Importance of Being Special: Planning for the Future of U.S. Special Operations Forces," *Defense and Security Analysis*, vol. 19, no. 3 (September 2003): 203-218.

<sup>25</sup> Susan L. Marquis, *Unconventional Warfare: Rebuilding U.S. Special Operations Forces* (Washington, D.C.: Brookings Institution Press, 1997), 4-5.

carried out gradually. In fact, it should probably occur at roughly the pace currently intended by the Army.<sup>26</sup>

Beyond Special Forces, certain other units are affected by the Army's ongoing restructuring as well. Exact numbers are unclear from existing documentation, but reportedly over one hundred thousand personnel, or some 10 percent of the total Army, will shift to new roles.

The active Army's combat divisions are also changing. Within the ten main active-duty combat divisions, the Army will add at least one brigade to the existing three brigades per division plus three independent brigades, to make a grand total of forty-three combat brigades in the active force as opposed to the thirty-three now available; it may increase further to forty-eight in 2007 or thereafter. Each unit will be somewhat smaller but also more independently deployable and operable than today's brigades. Of the forty-three planned brigades, twenty are envisioned as heavy forces, nine as light forces, five as medium-weight or Stryker brigades, and nine as airborne forces. Meanwhile, the Army National Guard's combat structure will change from its current composition of fifteen enhanced separate brigades, nineteen brigades within divisions, and one (non-enhanced) separate brigade to thirty-two brigade combat teams and one Stryker brigade combat team. In other words, the divisional structure will be eliminated, and in contrast to the active Army, the overall number of brigades will not increase.<sup>27</sup>

These smaller, more deployable brigade combat teams may make sense given improvements in Army firepower and the frequent demands of various small operations. (However, it is worth noting that other plans have also been offered and may be just as good, including Colonel Douglas Macgregor's idea of eliminating the division and building larger brigades and battalions.<sup>28</sup>)

Nevertheless, restructuring of this type does not change the basic fact that, today and for the foreseeable future, Army units will remain heavy. Nor does it change the fact that stabilization missions will continue to require large numbers of troops. For these reasons, the Army will not solve any of the fundamental challenges posed by a collapsing and nuclear-armed North Korea or Pakistan with its current plan, however desirable that plan may be for other reasons.

<sup>26</sup> Marquis, *Unconventional Warfare*, 4-5, 261-270.

<sup>27</sup> Brigadier General Larson, U.S. Army, Briefing at the Pentagon, February 11, 2004.

<sup>28</sup> Douglas A. Macgregor, "XVIII Airborne Corps: Spearhead of Military Transformation," *Defense Horizons*, No. 37 (January 2004).

## Should The U.S. Build Dedicated Stabilization Units?

As the United States military has increasingly taken on constabulary duties in the last decade, from Somalia to Haiti to Bosnia to Kosovo to Afghanistan and Iraq, some have argued it should create military or quasi-military units expressly devoted to that specialized task.<sup>29</sup> The model for such a capability might be the Italian carabinieri, a force of just over one hundred thousand normally under the control of the Ministry of Interior for police functions but also usable by the Ministry of Defense. Perhaps such units could somehow help with the challenge considered in this paper as well.

There is an obvious appeal to such an idea, given how frequently the United States has deployed troops to peace operations and stabilization missions. Regular combat troops do not always relish such tasks and are not fully trained for them. Specialized units could also be properly structured to include the appropriate contingents of civil affairs, military police, and psychological operations experts.

However, this idea has its downsides. Most importantly, many peace operations must deter renewed conflict and some must prevail in a counterinsurgency campaign – as in Iraq, not to mention Somalia and Afghanistan. Combat units – often heavily armed and slow-to-transport – are best at these jobs; they are trained to win battles, and they inspire respect and fear from those who would challenge them.<sup>30</sup> In large operations (most notably Iraq, but also Bosnia in the early years) the missions are too large in scale and typically too long in duration for a small number of specialized units to handle on their own. Even if such units existed, they would require considerable help from general-purpose formations.

In Iraq, for example, where twenty-four active U.S. Army brigades and five National Guard brigades served in 2003 or 2004, not even three or four additional constabulary divisions would have sufficiently addressed the challenge. Would a limited number of units have been best deployed in places such as Basra or Mosul, where the counterinsurgency mission was the least demanding? Or would they have been best deployed to the Sunni triangle and Baghdad, where they would have been most needed, given

...some have argued that the country should create military or quasi-military units expressly devoted to [stabilization].

<sup>29</sup> See for example, Max Boot, "Shouldering the Load, and the Rifle," *Los Angeles Times*, February 26, 2004; and U.S. Commission on National Security/21st Century, *Seeking a National Strategy: A Concert for Preserving Security and Promoting Freedom* (Washington, D.C.: U.S. Commission on National Security/21st Century, 2002).

<sup>30</sup> Richard K. Betts, "The Delusion of Impartial Intervention," *Foreign Affairs*, vol. 73, no. 6 (November/December 1994): 20-33; and Stephen John Stedman, "Alchemy for a New World Order," *Foreign Affairs*, vol. 74, no. 3 (May/June 1995): 17-18.

the difficulty of the job, but perhaps least well prepared for the rigors of combat? Alternatively, one could imagine using constabulary units for policing countrywide and overlaying them with smaller combat formations to fight the insurgency. This distinction between policing and fighting is largely artificial in the context of a guerrilla struggle, so the logic for such an idea would be difficult to sustain; moreover, having two units share responsibility in any sector would complicate command arrangements enormously.<sup>31</sup>

The experience of recent stabilization missions suggests that it is often not combat units per se that are most lacking in capabilities. Their performance in maintaining the peace has generally been acceptable, and where missions have proven difficult (Lebanon, Somalia, Afghanistan) it has generally been due to military challenges at least as much as peacekeeping ones. Rather, the most common problem has been the lack of proper planning for the stabilization missions, as well as the lack of quickly deployable police, judges, criminal law experts, and other civil society specialists who are needed yet generally unavailable.<sup>32</sup> In other words, troops are performing ably at policing, but U.S. instruments and planning for nation-building activities are weak. This is perhaps of less immediate concern in the context of a disintegrating nuclear-armed state, but it is still an important consideration over the longer term.

Given these considerations, the best course of action seems to be as follows. First, as the Army is already doing, the United States should add substantial quantities of the types of support units like military police that are frequently used in stabilization missions, yet in short supply.<sup>33</sup> Second, the United States should create non-military units in other parts of the government that would be useful in any stabilization mission. Their specialties should include not only security activities, but also reconstruction assistance efforts. The idea should be neither to create capacity that is already found in the armed forces nor to pay for large standing formations of many thousands of police and aid officials. For possible operations in countries the size of Iraq or Afghanistan, where standard sizing rules would suggest the need for up to one hundred thousand police during demanding stabilization operations, it would be inordinately expensive to maintain personnel permanently on standby in the United States.<sup>34</sup> Rather, the smarter approach would create a nucleus of experts in various fields on the full-time government payroll that could become the core of any larger operation, drawing on standby reservists and nongovernmental organizations and private contractors to beef up their ranks as needed.<sup>35</sup>

<sup>31</sup> Michael O'Hanlon, *Saving Lives with Force* (Washington, D.C.: Brookings, 1997).

<sup>32</sup> Robert M. Perito, *Where Is the Lone Ranger When We Need Him?* (Washington, D.C.: U.S. Institute of Peace, 2004), 323-337.

<sup>33</sup> Those with access to the necessary highly classified information tend to argue that more personnel are needed within the human intelligence ranks of the intelligence community as well. It is difficult to assess this argument or know how many people are needed without more information, but an increase in funding of at least several hundred million dollars a year – corresponding to at least thousands of added linguists and other experts – seems appropriate. See for example, Jane Harman, "Four Steps to Better Intelligence," *Washington Post*, February 8, 2004.

<sup>34</sup> See James T. Quinnlivan, "Force Requirements in Stability Operations," *Parameters*, vol. 25, no. 4 (Winter 1995-1996): 59-69.

<sup>35</sup> I am grateful to Lael Brainard and Susan Rice for help thinking through this problem; see also Alice M. Rivlin and Isabel Sawhill, eds.,

Third, the Department of Defense should create small teams designed to help plan and coordinate stabilization missions. It should carry out realistic exercises using these planning groups as well as relevant parts of the force structure, and, in general, plan to use its normal force structure for these types of tasks.

The broad message for this paper is this: the Army (and Marines) will continue to need relatively heavy forces capable of significant combat, even for missions like those that might be faced in a collapsing Pakistan or North Korea. There is no way around this fact, short of technological breakthroughs that are not now in the offing. The Army hoped for such breakthroughs and intended to purchase twenty-ton wheeled vehicles to replace many seventy-ton Abrams tanks in the coming years, but it now acknowledges that progress towards such vehicles is slow, if they are to be highly lethal and survivable – and even a large force of twenty-ton combat vehicles would take at least a month to deploy, so progress towards such a capability will not change the basic fact that mounting stabilization missions takes time.

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### Can The Allies Do More?

Any analysis of U.S. troop needs must include an assessment of what other countries can and will be able to do. Carrying out peace operations, stabilization efforts, and humanitarian intervention missions are hardly just a U.S. responsibility. For the two scenarios of most interest here, India and South Korea might do a great deal – quite possibly even more than the United States – but their ability to do so would be highly scenario-dependent.

Few countries besides the United States are very capable of projecting military force quickly and substantially beyond national borders today. About two-thirds of the world's military capacity resides in the U.S. armed forces – and an even higher percentage if one focuses on high-quality troops. Indeed, the United Kingdom, to some degree France and Australia, and to a lesser degree a few other Western

*Restoring Fiscal Sanity: How to Balance the Budget* (Washington, D.C.: Brookings, 2004), 46-51; Testimony of Michael Sheehan before the Senate Foreign Relations Committee, April 21, 2004; and U.S. Institute of Peace, "Building Civilian Capacity for U.S. Stability Operations: The Rule of Law Component," *U.S. Institute of Peace Special Report No. 118* (April 2004)

countries such as Italy, possess the only other militaries capable of any significant rapid intervention missions whatsoever. This situation could change over time, thus offering some hope that future demands on American ground forces may drop as allied capabilities increase; however, the added capability will probably be too slow in coming to significantly affect U.S. force planning in the foreseeable future.

Convincing allies to share more of the burden for interventions is not easy, even when the issues at hand are less contentious than the current Iraq mission. Financial resources limit many countries' efforts – and it is difficult to convince another democracy to rethink its budgetary priorities to accord with a global security agenda that its citizens may not share (or may prefer not to do their part to support).

All that said, however, Western countries can do better. By emulating Britain and Australia, as well as the U.S. Marine Corps, they can acquire significantly more deployable capacity without increasing budgets substantially. Reorienting defense priorities to buy enough dedicated strategic lift (ships as much as planes), as well as in-theater logistics support, such as mobile hospitals and equipment repair facilities and old-fashioned trucks, can achieve a great deal. The fact of the matter is, today, the European allies are spending nearly half of what the United States does on the armed forces, yet have no more than one-fifth as much overall deployable capacity. There is great room for improvement even in the absence of defense budget increases, however desirable the latter might also be in certain countries. Indeed, a prominent German think tank has made a similar argument, calling for Europe collectively to establish a goal of fielding one hundred seventy thousand deployable forces.<sup>36</sup>

There are also promising efforts to improve capacity outside of the Western world. Several merit greater U.S. support; perhaps the most striking is in Africa. After the 1994 Rwanda genocide, the Clinton administration launched in 1996 a program called the African Crisis Response Initiative (ACRI) to build African capacity to respond to such crises. The goal was to train and equip seven to ten interoperable battalions that, with airlift provided by others, could undertake complex humanitarian interventions effectively. More than ten thousand troops from Senegal, Uganda, Malawi, Mali, Ghana, Benin, Côte d'Ivoire, and Kenya have now been trained under this program and its successor. Later, the Clinton administration also conducted Operation Focus Relief, a temporary but major program to prepare West African units for service in Sierra Leone. These steps marked a modest yet important start based on the right vision. In the late 1990s, the United Nations (U.N.) also reviewed its peace operations capacities and issued the Brahimi Report, stressing the urgent need for member states to make available to the U.N. rapidly deployable trained and equipped forces.

<sup>36</sup> Julian Lindley-French and Franco Algeri, *A European Defence Strategy* (Guetersloh, Bertelsmann Foundation, May 2004), 10.

During a February 2004 summit of the African Union, the European Union pledged three hundred million dollars to create, train, and equip five regional, multinational stand-by brigades. The goal was that they should be able to handle traditional peacekeeping by 2005 and more complex peace enforcement or intervention missions by 2010. Principal credit must go to African nations themselves who, having learned from 1994 that certain human rights abuses are so extreme as to require external intervention in the internal affairs of sovereign states, took the lead in establishing the brigades. The Bush administration has gotten serious about this initiative as well; it convinced the U.S. Congress to provide substantial funds (approaching one hundred million dollars) in 2005 and made a similar request for 2006 as well.

Of course, none of the above countries or groups of countries can change the laws of physics. While it would help the United States enormously to have more international assistance for a future mission than it garnered in Iraq, its friends and allies face the same constraints in terms of deployment times and force requirements. In fact, starting from a much less advanced position, their challenges are even greater, and their likely response times to a crisis much slower.

### Developing “Mobile” Border Screening Capability

In thinking through the idea of stabilizing a collapsed country, the implicit assumption above has been that once order is restored in a country, nuclear weapons will no longer be vulnerable to theft or easy relocation. Of course, any military bases where they may have been initially stored will have been fully safeguarded; semi-secure sites to which they might have been relocated will be protected as well.

But what if nuclear weapons or materials are not so easily located by a stabilization force? One horrible possibility is that with the barnyard gate open, the weapons were moved out of the country before stabilization forces could arrive. Given that it could take weeks or months for these forces to arrive on station, depending among other things on the speed and the degree of collapse in North Korea or Pakistan as well as the ability of South Korea or India to quickly restore order, this worry is very real indeed.

However, another equally probable scenario would place the weapons in the hands of a rogue element of the military or a nongovernmental militia – or even a terrorist group within the country. Those groups might be in the process of exploring means of moving a weapon outside the country or of selling it to a criminal or terrorist organization but might well not have done enough advanced planning to move quickly. In addition, their area of secure operations within their country might be quite limited, and

consequently, they would have a far easier time storing the weapon than moving it outside the country. Under such circumstances, what should a stabilization force do? To search the entire country room by room, vehicle by vehicle, foxhole by foxhole would be impossible in any reasonable time frame. Presumably, therefore, stabilization forces would wish to consider a two-track approach: they would develop intelligence sources on the possible locations of nuclear materials, while also safeguarding the nation’s borders and checking internal transportation systems frequently to look for the dangerous materials should anyone try to move them about or out of the country.

This approach would require superb homeland security tools with a sweep and reliability not yet attained in the United States. At a minimum, radiation detectors used by trained individuals would have to be deployed at all points of embarkation including airports, ports, and land crossings. Given that roughly twenty thousand personnel are devoted to inspecting U.S. trade, a very simple and crude extrapolation suggests that several thousand would likely be needed in North Korea and perhaps ten thousand in Pakistan. With such capacity comes a respectable chance of finding any nuclear weapon on its way out of the country. A well-shielded weapon might escape detection, but such a weapon with shielding would be so large, weighing many hundreds of kilograms, if not several tons, that it might be visually detected. In addition, a rogue militia or terrorist group might not have the means or knowledge to shield such a weapon effectively.

Were the nuclear material highly enriched uranium or plutonium rather than an assembled nuclear bomb, the danger of its being shipped abroad might be slightly less, but the probability it would escape notice would be much greater. Someone on foot could carry such materials over the border with ease. This concern would be especially great in Pakistan, with its long land borders and its proximity to jihadist groups in places such as Afghanistan and Uzbekistan. Scaling from the U.S. model along the Mexican border, where several thousand personnel imperfectly monitor a land border less than half the length of Pakistan’s, at least twenty thousand personnel and probably many more would be needed to begin to secure Pakistan’s perimeter with the degree of robustness required in such a situation. Any operational plan for stabilizing a nuclear state would thus need many thousands of individuals quickly deployable to remote sites, trained in border and customs monitoring practices, and equipped with suitable technology.

## CONCLUSION

The problem of a collapsing nuclear-armed state will remain one of the most menacing conceivable threats in the future international environment. Military options to address such a scenario would require considerable good fortune to succeed in the critical goal of securing custodial control over the nuclear weapons. With excellent intelligence, a surgical strike might destroy the weapons, but such intelligence is usually lacking, and the strike would have to be conducted very quickly. Unless a country's larger immediate neighbor could step effectively into the fray without worsening the situation, a sizeable mission to secure an entire country would take weeks or months to complete under most circumstances, by which point many different groups could have had opportunities to obtain the dangerous arms.

To be sure, the United States needs better tools for addressing state collapse that might occur in a place like Pakistan or North Korea. Some new military systems for rapid deployment and strike, certain intelligence assets, technologies such as radiation monitors, and deployable units outside DOD (such as reconstruction capabilities within the State Department) make eminent sense. Even with all such capabilities and support from other international players, however, the global community would need extreme good fortune to control nuclear materials after the collapse of a nuclear-weapons state. If there is one single broad theme that emerges from all this discussion it is the criticality of preventing that type of collapse in the first place.

