send this article
to a friend

Debating security strategies

David S. Yost examines the implications for NATO of US strategic thinking and urges an Alliance-wide debate.

In October 2003, during their informal gathering in Colorado Springs, NATO's defence ministers considered how their military forces might cope with a terrorist threat involving chemical and biological weapons. While details of the discussions remain classified, it seems that the defence ministers got a clearer picture of future operational and decision-making requirements, including the urgency of pursuing the development of the NATO Response Force and the rest of the transformation agenda approved at last year's Prague Summit.

US vision: The strategic thinking advanced in the United States since September 2001 could serve as a starting point for Alliance-wide debate on strategy (� US DoD)

The discussions were valuable because they may help to foster what the Alliance needs more of - wide-ranging and thorough debate about strategy, including strategic concepts and their practical requirements and political implications. The strategic thinking advanced in the United States since September 2001 in various documents - above all, the *Quadrennial Defense Review*, the *Nuclear Posture Review* and the *National Security Strategy* - deserves critical analysis and could serve as a point of departure.

To date, the debate on new security concepts that has taken place in the United States has attracted more attention than that in Europe, though Europeans may be catching up following publication of an EU security strategy. Nevertheless, as disagreements over the Iraq campaign demonstrate, there is a need for the Allies to examine US concepts seriously and thereby carry forward an informed transatlantic debate. Three of these concepts deserve particular attention: dissuasion, deterrence by denial, and pre-emption.

Dissuasion

Dissuasion is of course the word the French use for deterrence, but the US Department of Defense gave dissuasion a specific definition in the *Quadrennial Defense Review*, a definition that has been used in subsequent documents. In short, "dissuasion" means to persuade other powers to refrain from initiating an "arms race" or competition in military capabilities with the United States. The official strategy documents suggest that dissuasion is to be achieved by convincing the adversary of the futility of competition with the United States, either on a general basis or in a particular category of military power, which could be nuclear weapons or fighter aircraft or attack submarines or anything else. The goal is to lead the adversary to conclude that it would be pointless to compete in the acquisition of military capabilities. In the May/June 2002 issue of *Foreign Affairs*, US Secretary of Defense Donald Rumsfeld described the logic of the concept by giving an example. "We must develop new assets, the mere possession of which discourages adversaries from competing," he wrote. "For example, deployment of effective missile defenses may dissuade others from spending to obtain ballistic missiles, because missiles will not provide them with what they want: the power to hold US and allied cities hostage to nuclear blackmail."

If we consider this example, there is clearly a role for the Allies in dissuasion. Moreover, by this logic, the Allied role in dissuading potential adversaries from seeking ballistic missiles will grow to the extent that Allies and the Alliance as a whole develop and deploy missile defenses.

Some NATO Allies have been pursuing shorter-range missile defences for years. The United States has been working with Germany and the Netherlands on Patriot PAC-3 and with Germany and Italy on MEADS, the Medium Extended Air Defence System. The French-Italian Aster system has been deployed on the French aircraft carrier, the *Charles de Gaulle*; and France and Italy plan to deploy the first ground-based versions in 2005. Some Allies are also acquiring or intend to acquire Aegis radars and Standard Missile 3 interceptors for sea-based missile defence.

In addition, the Alliance as a whole has completed various Theatre Missile Defence (TMD) studies. In November 2002 in Prague the Allies went beyond TMD for the protection of deployed forces when they decided "to examine options for protecting

The Alliance needs more debate about strategy, strategic concepts, their practical requirements and political implications

Alliance territory, forces and population
centres against the full range of missile threats". The feasibility study for this is expected to be complete in the first half of 2005.

The fact that Allies are pursuing missile defenses - actual capabilities as well as studies - does not, however, mean that they accept the US theory of dissuasion. In fact, a number of Allied observers, like some US observers, have expressed caution, if not actual scepticism. The usual comment is that, even if NATO or the United States dissuades adversaries from pursuing one type of military capability, determined adversaries will pursue other options, including asymmetrical warfare; and we must be as well-prepared as possible to deal with this threat. The US administration has, however, been concerned about this risk as well, as discussions of asymmetrical threats in the United States indicate.

With regard to Secretary Rumsfeld's specific example, critics have asked, to what extent will NATO or US missile defenses discourage missile-builders and missile-buyers that are interested in being able to launch missiles against non-NATO countries? If the immediate targets of their missiles are regional antagonists outside NATO territory, the strike capability that could be redirected on command against NATO is a bonus. By this logic, greater utility for NATO resides in the capacity of missile defences actually to defend against missile attacks than in their potential effect on missile acquisition decisions. The US government is, however, interested in operational effectiveness as well as in trying to achieve dissuasion, if possible. Indeed, achieving dissuasion depends on attaining such practical effectiveness. Even if the capabilities fail to prevent military competition, US strategy documents suggest that they may complicate the adversary's planning and shape the competition in directions advantageous to the Alliance.

Critics have raised further objections. If the purpose of dissuasion is to persuade potential adversaries not to compete in the accumulation of military capabilities, could this not be achieved by methods other than - or in addition to - publicising Allied and US military superiority? As various Allied and US observers have pointed out, other activities could contribute to the aim of discouraging arms competitions, and these activities generally involve cooperation with allies and other security partners. They include shaping the security environment by upholding export controls, legal norms, and non-proliferation regimes; cultivating positive political relations to lessen incentives for military competition; promoting regional political stabilisation and security to reduce motives for competition with neighbours; and nation-building and state-building, notably to support democratisation and the free market.

While such cooperative activities have not been highlighted in some US strategy documents, the US position has been evolving. In practice, it seems, the United States is increasingly disposed to accept an expanded definition of how to achieve dissuasion. The clearest signs of this include the interest in nation-building and state-building in Afghanistan and Iraq and the efforts to carry forward the peace process in Israeli-Palestinian relations.

Deterrence by denial

If dissuasion does not work, arms competitions and conflicts may follow, and the goal then will become deterring aggression or coercion. US strategists have for years advocated supplementing the Cold War's dominant form of deterrence - deterrence by threat of punishment - with deterrence by denial. Deterrence by denial means persuading the enemy not to attack by convincing him that his attack will be defeated - that is, that he will not be able to achieve his operational objectives.

In January 2002, US Assistant Secretary of Defense for International Security Policy J.D. Crouch made a reference to this approach to deterrence when he discussed the findings of the *Nuclear Posture Review*. Crouch suggested that the United States could employ missile "defenses to discourage attack by frustrating enemy attack plans". In other words, if the missile defences do not discourage an enemy from acquiring missiles (the goal of dissuasion), they might discourage him from using them (the goal of deterrence by denial).

The deterrence by denial theory is not limited to missile defences, of course. The theory applies to any capability that can deny an enemy success in achieving his objectives. For example, passive defences such as decontamination equipment and suits and gas masks for protection against chemical and biological weapons might help to convince an enemy not to use such weapons. The *National Security Strategy* suggests that "consequence-management" capabilities for responding to weapons of mass destruction (WMD) attacks may contribute to both dissuasion and deterrence by denial. It states: "Minimizing the effects of WMD use against our people will help deter those who possess such weapons and dissuade those who seek to acquire them by persuading enemies that they cannot attain their desired ends."

To be sure, it is hard to prove the validity of any theory of deterrence or dissuasion since it is not possible to demonstrate conclusively why something did not happen. The absence of arms race activity does not prove that a competitor has been dissuaded, just as the absence of aggression does not prove that a hypothetical aggressor has been deterred. Moreover, even if we were correct about a deterrence arrangement working for a while, we could not be sure of its permanent reliability.

Pre-emption

In other words, deterrence may fail and war may come with little warning. This possibility brings us to

the controversial topic of pre-emptive action, which is linked to doubts about the reliability of any kind of deterrence. The *National Security Strategy* states that: "Traditional concepts of deterrence will not work against a terrorist enemy whose avowed tactics are wanton destruction and the targeting of innocents; whose so-called soldiers seek martyrdom in death and whose most potent protection is statelessness. The overlap between states that sponsor terror and those that pursue WMD compels us to action."

"We must adapt the concept of imminent threat to the capabilities and objectives of today's adversaries," the document continues. "Rogue states and terrorists do not seek to attack us using conventional means. They know such attacks would fail. Instead, they rely on acts of terror and, potentially, the use of weapons of mass destruction - weapons that can be easily concealed, delivered covertly, and used without warning." It concludes that: "The United States has long maintained the option of pre-emptive actions to counter a sufficient threat to our national security. The greater the threat, the greater is the risk of inaction - and the more compelling the case for taking anticipatory action to defend ourselves, even if uncertainty remains as to the time and place of the enemy's attack. To forestall or prevent such hostile acts by our adversaries, the United States will, if necessary, act pre-emptively."

The concept of "pre-emptive action" is controversial partly because the US administration has elevated it to the status of a doctrine, instead of an option available to all governments in extreme circumstances. Moreover, definitional issues have exacerbated the controversy. The US government has chosen to call "pre-emptive" what many Americans, Europeans, and others would call "preventive" war. Many observers would make the following distinction: *Pre-emptive attack* consists of prompt action on the basis of evidence that an enemy is about to strike. In contrast, *preventive war* involves military operations undertaken to avert a plausible but hypothetical future risk, such as an unacceptable imbalance of power, a situation of increased vulnerability, or even potential subjugation - or the possibility of a transfer of WMD to a terrorist group. The latter risk was one of the main justifications advanced by the US government for the military campaign against Saddam Hussein's regime in Iraq in March and April 2003.

On the whole, even Allied governments that opposed the US-led action to end Saddam Hussein's regime in Iraq have no objection to the idea of pre-emption on the basis of evidence that an enemy is about to attack. In fact, that principle appears explicitly in the most recent and authoritative expression of French security policy, the military programme law for 2003-2008. This document states that: "The possibility of a pre-emptive action could be considered, as soon as a situation of explicit and known threat was recognised."

Allied and US critics of US policy argued that there was no evidence that Saddam Hussein was about to attack the United States or to transfer WMD to terrorists, so this was not a pre-emptive action but a preventive war - a war on the basis of a hypothetical future threat. Critics condemned the idea of preventive war as a violation of international law. Both critics and supporters of the use of force against the Saddam Hussein regime in Iraq asserted the need to uphold the authority of the United Nations Security Council. Critics also argued that the US approach amounted to a prescription for permanent war, unless the United States could somehow dominate the entire world.

The critical analyses sometimes failed to acknowledge the problem that in some exceptional cases pre-emptive or even preventive action may be the wiser choice - that is, in some cases, notably involving WMD, pre-emption or preventive intervention may be more prudent than waiting to be attacked. The challenge is identifying which cases truly require pre-emptive action, and which cases may even justify preventive war. This is not a new problem. It goes back at least as far as Thucydides and the Peloponnesian War, but it has been rendered more acute by modern technologies.

The draft EU security strategy paper presented in June 2003 by EU High Representative for the Common Foreign and Security Policy Javier Solana pointed out that WMD-armed terrorist groups could "inflict damage on a scale previously possible only for states and armies. In such cases, deterrence would fail." By way of prescription, Solana suggested, among other points, that: "Pre-emptive engagement can avoid more serious problems in the future... With the new threats the first line of defence will often be abroad. The new threats are dynamic. Left alone, they will become more dangerous. The risks of proliferation grow over time; left alone, terrorist networks will become ever more dangerous (we should have tackled *al Qaida* much earlier). This implies that we should be ready to act before a crisis occurs. Conflict prevention and threat prevention cannot start too early.We need to develop a strategic culture that fosters early, rapid, and when necessary, robust intervention."

While some of these formulations are ambiguous, they could contribute to an Alliance-wide debate on strategy, notably with regard to pre-emption and preventive intervention. There will, however, be no easy solution to the problem of assessment and choice.

Debate

It is constructive to debate the issues in general terms. It is useful to discuss, for instance, questions such as the following: Under what circumstances may the resort to pre-emption or even preventive war be justified? Should the international legal regime be explicitly modified to provide in extreme situations for new defensive options, even preventive war, that take into account unprecedented vulnerabilities arising from modern technologies? How should the classical criteria for pre-emption of "necessity" and "proportionality" be construed in light of modern technologies and strategic options? What principles in addition to "necessity" (or "imminence") and "proportionality" should govern the

decisions? What might be the consequences for international order of recognising such new precedents and principles in international law? How could risks of precipitate and/or ill-founded actions be diminished? To what extent might policies of pre-emption or preventive intervention encourage adversaries to adopt similar policies and thus lead to more volatile crisis situations? To what extent could the responsibility for undertaking pre-emption or preventive intervention (and dealing with its consequences) be shared? While the US government has recognised the obvious desirability of multilateral legitimisation, notably via the UN Security Council, for preventive or pre-emptive action, such legitimisation might not be available in all circumstances. If it is not available, what constraints should states and coalitions observe in exercising the right to self-defence recognised in Article 51 of the UN Charter? To what extent, and in what ways, should the Alliance's decision-making structures and capabilities be modified to enhance the ability of Allies, acting under NATO auspices or in other coalitions, to assess evolving threats and to conduct pre-emptive actions?

Discussing such questions may well deepen understanding of the risks and responsibilities in policies of pre-emption or preventive intervention. At the end of the day, however, we will be forced to make decisions about specific cases.

The US *National Security Strategy* offers a point of departure. It recognises that: "No nation can build a safer, better world alone. Alliances and multilateral institutions can multiply the strength of freedom-loving nations." NATO holds an exceptional role in US policy, because "There is little of lasting consequence that the United States can accomplish in the world without the sustained cooperation of its allies and friends in Canada and Europe." When it comes to contingencies in which "pre-emptive" action may be required, the *National Security Strategy* suggests three guidelines for action. It states: "To support pre-emptive options, we will build better, more integrated intelligence capabilities to provide timely, accurate information on threats, wherever they may emerge; coordinate closely with allies to form a common assessment of the most dangerous threats; and continue to transform our military forces to ensure our ability to conduct rapid and precise operations to achieve decisive results."

The second guideline - to "coordinate closely with allies to form a common assessment of the most dangerous threats" - is most important if we are to preserve Alliance cohesion. As we saw in the Iraq case, Allies may differ sharply in their assessments of the gravity of the threats in specific cases, and in their views about the right way to deal with them. Given the likelihood that the Allies will face more challenges of comparable gravity, the need for close coordination in making assessments and defining policy choices is increasingly imperative. Concepts will carry us only so far. In the end, we will be forced to deal with messy realities that do not fit into tidy conceptual categories.

Accordingly, to complement the decisions on NATO's transformation taken in Prague, the Allies should initiate a determined effort to develop a common assessment of the most dangerous threats to Alliance security and possible responses, on the occasion of NATO's next summit, scheduled to be held in Istanbul in June 2004.

David S. Yost is a professor at the Naval Postgraduate School in Monterey, California, and author of "NATO Transformed" (United States Institute of Peace Press, 1998). The views expressed are the author's alone and do not represent those of the Department of the Navy or any US government agency. He is grateful to Sorin Lungu, Joseph Pilat, Michael R�hle and Diego Ruiz Palmer for comments on earlier drafts of this essay, which is based on a presentation given at the conference "Transatlantic Relations at a Crossroads", Amsterdam, 19-20 June 2003, sponsored by the Netherlands Atlantic Association and the Germany Institute Amsterdam.