Chapter 1

The UN and Debates Over Weapons of Mass Destruction

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Introduction

Controlling the risks posed by weapons of mass destruction (WMD)—nuclear, chemical, and biological weapons—has been high on the agenda of the United Nations (UN) since its inception. Despite the fact that the UN Charter places little emphasis on arms control and disarmament, the very first General Assembly resolution in January 1946 called for the new UN Atomic Energy Commission to make proposals for “the elimination from national armaments of atomic weapons and of all other major weapons adaptable to mass destruction.” Since then, the UN has viewed reducing the risks to peace and security posed by these especially destructive weapons as one of its major tasks.

Traditionally, the major debates on WMD have focused on three dominant issues: First, how best to prevent destabilizing arms races and the use of such weapons? Is it through disarmament, arms control (including nonproliferation regimes), prohibitions on use, or deterrence? The second issue concerns which states contribute most to the dangers posed by these weapons: Is it the existing nuclear powers or future nuclear powers? The third issue concerns the type of inspection and monitoring regimes necessary to enforce any agreements: How can acceptable monitoring schemes be developed in the face of dual-use technologies?

Once very much an East-West issue, with the end of the Cold War debates over WMD became predominantly North-South issues. The central problem is how to balance the legitimate demands of developing countries for access to advanced technologies with the legitimate interests of the international community in controlling the spread of these weapons. On a more fundamental level, the WMD issue is also tied into debates over status and identity in the international community. Who has access to the identity of “responsible state” and, as such, can possess nuclear weapons, for example? To put it more bluntly, what right does the United States (and by extension the other “responsible” nuclear powers) have to possess nuclear weapons while other countries do not?
The latter issue has been raised in particularly acute fashion in recent years by the highly unilateralist policies of the Bush administration in the United States. U.S. leaders appeared to pursue new roles for nuclear weapons in counterproliferation strategies and the fight against terrorism, while expressing active disdain for the UN and international treaties and advocating a new doctrine of preemptive use of military force to prevent acquisition of WMD by others. Since these views are not widely shared by the rest of the world, debates over how to manage the problem of WMD have, in recent years, taken the somewhat startling form of the United States versus most of the rest of the world.

These debates reflect two different views of the nature of the global security problem. The first, expressed by the Bush administration, is that with the end of the superpower conflict, the world confronts a fundamentally different proliferation problem. Arms control and disarmament agreements negotiated during the Cold War do not work for holdout states (and nonstate actors) who refuse to adopt the norms of the regimes’ founders. In this view, security is best achieved by preserving unfettered freedom of action and reliance on self-help and military strength. The second view is that in the wake of the 9/11 attacks, the political will to constrain proliferation has never been stronger, and multilateral cooperation is essential to keep WMD from falling into the wrong hands. The latter view prevails in most member states (although the UN itself favors WMD in the hands of no one). However, the United States has put increasing pressure on the UN in recent years to demonstrate that WMD regimes can be effective in preventing proliferation even in the hard cases involving those it identifies as recalcitrant states, such as Iran, North Korea, and Iraq before the 2003 war. Developing countries, while agreeing, also tend to view the nuclear powers as recalcitrant states.

This chapter briefly reviews the UN’s role with respect to nuclear, chemical, and biological weapons. It also examines the important case of “coercive disarmament” against Iraq. It concludes with an evaluation of the UN’s contribution to controlling WMD, some of the constraints it faces, and the prospects for its effectiveness in an era of American power.

### Nuclear Weapons

Contemporary debates over nuclear weapons have focused on several highly contentious issues, including implementation of the Nuclear Nonproliferation Treaty (NPT), the nuclear programs of India, Israel, and Pakistan, and the lack of compliance with nonproliferation commitments by Iraq, North Korea, and Iran. The NPT, opened for signature on July 1, 1968, is the centerpiece of efforts to control the spread of nuclear weapons. It divides the world into two groups of states: those who possessed nuclear weapons at the time the treaty was negotiated and those who did not. Its immediate objective is to halt the spread of nuclear weapons to new states while promoting the peaceful uses of nuclear energy, but its ultimate objective is complete nuclear disarmament.