Mutual Assured Destruction

By Robert Jervis

It is a clue to the eventual demise of mutual assured destruction (MAD) that the term was coined by a critic who sought to highlight how ludicrous the concept was. In the 1960s, Donald Brennan—an analyst at the conservative Hudson Institute, who was making the case for ballistic missile defense—used the acronym MAD to ridicule the idea that in a nuclear war, or even a large conventional conflict, each side should be prepared to destroy the other’s cities and society. Of course, this objective was not sensible, but MAD proponents argued that was the point: The outcome would be so dreadful that both sides would be deterred from starting a nuclear war or even taking actions that might lead to it.

Throughout much of the Cold War, U.S. declaratory policy (i.e., what policymakers said in public) closely approximated MAD. The view, most clearly articulated by then Secretary of Defense Robert McNamara, was that there was little utility in adding strategic weapons above those needed for MAD, that nuclear superiority was meaningless, that defense was useless, and that this bizarre configuration was in everyone’s interest. Indeed, the implication was that the United States should not only avoid menacing the Soviets’ retaliatory capability but also help the Soviets make their weapons invulnerable—an idea that intrigued McNamara.

Critics like military strategists Herman Kahn and Colin Gray disagreed. They argued that nuclear warheads were immensely destructive but not qualitatively different from previous weapons of warfare. Consequently, the traditional rules of strategy applied: Security policy could only rest on credible threats (i.e., those that it made sense to carry out). The adoption of a policy that involved throwing up your hands and destroying the world if war actually broke out was not only the height of irresponsibility; MAD also failed to address the main strategic concern for the United States, which was to prevent the Soviets from invading Western Europe. The stability that MAD was supposed to provide actually would have allowed U.S. adversaries to use force below the nuclear level whenever it was to their advantage to do so. If the United States could not have threatened to escalate a conflict by using nuclear weapons, then the Soviets would have had free rein to fight and win a conventional war in Europe.

Privately, most generals and top civilian leaders were never convinced of the utility of MAD, and that skepticism was reflected in both Soviet and U.S. war

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planning. Each side strove for advantage, sought to minimize damage to its society, deployed defenses when deemed practical, and sought limited nuclear options that were militarily effective. Yet, for all these efforts, it is highly probable that a conventional war in Europe or, even more likely, the limited use of nuclear weapons would have prompted a full-scale nuclear war that would have resulted in mutual destruction.

MAD’s credibility plummeted even further during the last stages of the Cold War, as the Soviet military buildup convinced U.S. policymakers that the U.S.S.R. did not believe in MAD and was seeking nuclear advantage. The Soviet Union’s invasion of Afghanistan and its African adventures revealed that MAD could not protect all U.S. interests. In response, U.S. leaders talked about the significance of nuclear superiority and about the possibility of surviving a nuclear war. Most dramatically, President Ronald Reagan called for missile defense, declaring in 1983 that “to look down to an endless future with both of us sitting here with these horrible missiles aimed at each other and the only thing preventing a holocaust is just so long as no one pulls this trigger—this is unthinkable.”

Proponents of Reagan’s anti-MAD policies credited them with helping to bring down the Soviet empire. Even those who disagreed had little reason to resurrect MAD in the aftermath of the Cold War. When the United States emerged as the dominant military power, defense became a much more attractive option than deterrence. Why threaten to punish another country for an attack when you can beat it back? According to MAD, trying to protect yourself is destabilizing because it threatens the other side. In a world where the United States faces no peer competitor that could threaten it with complete annihilation, thinking in these terms makes no sense. That’s why no U.S. president since Jimmy Carter has been willing to renounce missile defense, despite the clear lack of foolproof technology. Indeed, even the simplest missiles are difficult to intercept. Ironically, primitive warheads that tumble in flight—the very types of missiles that might be launched by low-tech U.S. adversaries such as Iraq or North Korea—are harder to track than are more sophisticated ones. And adversaries could deliver nuclear weapons in a variety of other ways, such as by airplanes, ships, and cargo containers.

The threat of terrorism also makes defense preferable to deterrence. How do you deter a suicide bomber? In theory, the U.S. government could concoct a minimalist form of MAD by threatening retaliation in the form of killing terrorists’ families or destroying Muslim holy sites. But these options are politically unpalatable. Defense, however, may not work either. Warding off 99 terrorist attacks does little good if the 100th succeeds, especially if weapons of mass destruction (WMD) are used. A defensive strategy that could achieve even 99 percent efficiency is hard to imagine short of incredible worldwide cooperation, expense, and sacrifice of civil liberties.

Confronted with these dilemmas, the Bush administration has turned to what it calls preemption, but what is actually prevention. (The
difference between the two is in the timescale: The former means an attack against an adversary that is about to strike; the latter is a move to prevent a threat from fully emerging.) An adversary who cannot be deterred and whose attacks cannot be defended against must be stopped before it gains the capability to do great harm. This strategy makes more sense in theory than in practice, however. Moving before the threat fully materializes is rational only if the government is quite certain that failing to do so will lead to a disastrous attack by an adversary. But predicting the future accurately is quite difficult. The other side of this coin is that an adversary who believes the United States is certain to attack will have nothing to lose by resorting to WMD.

This doctrine of prevention has brought the United States full circle, with the Bush administration now echoing the refrain of early MAD critics who said that nuclear weapons were not qualitatively different from other kinds. As such, the White House has rejected one of the central precepts of MAD: Nuclear weapons are good for deterrence only. Instead, the Bush administration sees (or perhaps is looking for) significant preemptive military uses for nuclear weapons, such as destroying an adversary’s WMD sites (silos or weapons facilities) that are buried deep underground.

MAD does not seem appropriate for rivals in the Third World either. In certain scenarios, deterrence still works to some degree. For instance, it would be suicidal for Pakistan to attack India with nuclear weapons. Even if Pakistan were able to destroy India’s nuclear stockpile, India’s armed forces could still dismember Pakistan. However, a nuclear war could begin if the Indian government launched a large military incursion aimed at destroying terrorist camps or punishing Pakistan for supporting these groups. The Pakistani might decide, in turn, to use nuclear weapons on their own soil against invading forces. Indian officials have said that they would respond with nuclear weapons, but this threat might not be sufficiently credible to deter Pakistan in what would be a desperate situation. MAD may then be in the dustbin of history, but states that employ nuclear weapons or force their adversaries to do so may find themselves there as well.

**LIMITS TO GROWTH**

**By Bjørn Lomborg and Olivier Rubin**

In the book of Genesis, God decreed that there should be growth by never allowing the Tower of Babel to reach the sky. In modern times, the task of delineating human aspirations fell to the Club of Rome, which, in its 1972 study, *Limits to Growth*, declared that in a world of finite resources, unlimited economic expansion and prosperity are impossible to pursue.

The international scientists, who at the invitation of Italian industrialist Aurelio Peccei came together in the late 1960s to form the Club of Rome, meant well. They were united by their conviction that enormous ecological problems faced humankind and called for extraordinary political measures. At the time of its release, *Limits to Growth* had a profound impact, spawning alarmist headlines such as “A Computer Looks Ahead and Shudders” and “Scientists Warn of Global Catastrophe.” The subsequent 1973 oil crisis, prompted in part by the Arab embargo, made the study seem eerily prescient.

But 30 years later, the Club of Rome’s most dire forecasts have failed to come true. Vital minerals such as gold, silver, copper, tin, zinc, mercury, lead, tungsten, and oil should have been exhausted by now. But they aren’t. Due to an exponential increase in population growth, the world should be facing desperate shortages of arable land and rising food prices. Yet food prices have never been lower. And the world’s health should have been undermined by an exponential increase in pollution. People today, however, live longer than ever before, and in Western cities, most pollutants are on the decline, driven down by technological advances and environmental legislation.

The quality of predictions didn’t improve in *Limits to Growth’s* 1992 sequel, *Beyond the Limits*, which warned that food per capita would peak in the

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