CHEMICAL, BIOLOGICAL, RADIOLOGICAL, AND NUCLEAR WEAPONS CONSIDERATIONS

Last Updated: 12 July 2019

The employment of nuclear weapons is a form of strategic attack (SA), which can produce political and psychological effects well beyond their actual physical effects. Only the president may authorize the employment of nuclear weapons. See AFDP 3-72, *Nuclear Operations*, for a more complete discussion of nuclear operations.

It is US policy not to employ biological or chemical weapons. Nevertheless, chemical, biological, radiological, and nuclear (CBRN) weapons have great potential for any foe who seeks to induce strategic effects. For example, such weapons may be used to induce terror or mass dislocation, to deter a course of action (e.g., intervention), to deny access, blackmail, or enhance international prestige. Air Force forces should be prepared to deter CBRN weapons and respond against any adversary that threatens to use or uses CBRN. Preemptive SA against an adversary's CBRN capability before it can be weaponized, relocated, exported, hidden, or used may be a commander's best option against those threats, but collateral effects from such attacks must always be considered: they may be severe and may thus dictate alternate courses of action. The growing danger from proliferation of such weapons requires that Air Force forces be capable of locating and defeating them with a high degree of accuracy, in order to ensure their destruction while minimizing collateral damage.

The potential for catastrophic collateral damage is a particularly important concern when attacking such weapons directly. If an enemy relocates CBRN weapons systems close to civilian population centers with the intent of shielding them from attack (a violation of Article 58 of Additional Protocol 1 of the Geneva Conventions), it may be politically, legally, or morally difficult to target them unless their use is certain and imminent. In such cases, an indirect approach may be better. Directly attacking production or supporting infrastructure, such as plants where nontoxic chemical precursors are made or key means of transportation used to move them may have the desired effects and achieve the objectives. It may be necessary to use nonlethal means to force an adversary to move the weapons to locations where they can be safely attacked. It may also be safest to degrade or destroy some production facilities before they begin production, as the Israelis did against Iraq's Osiraq nuclear reactor in 1981. Close coordination of SA with information and diplomatic efforts are especially important when preemptive strikes against CBRN capabilities are considered, since strategies to publicly justify the strikes or mitigate the undesired effects of collateral damage are

likely to play a central role in both deterring the adversary and sustaining political will for subsequent attacks. Preemptive targeting of potential CBRN threats may raise significant issues under the law of war and should be assessed for compliance with domestic and international law, including the law of armed conflict, and relevant US treaty obligations.

For more discussion on CBRN considerations, see AFDP 3-40, *Counter-Weapons of Mass Destruction Operations*.
