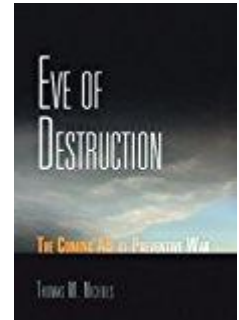


**Thomas M. Nichols.** *Eve of Destruction: The Coming Age of Preventive War.*

Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2008. xiv + 171 pp. \$39.95, cloth, ISBN 978-0-8122-4066-5.



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## **The Westphalian Order, Strained to Breaking**

To many, September 11, 2001 was the day the world changed. Shortly afterward, President George W. Bush let it be known that the United States would act proactively in the world, identifying potential threats and dealing with them before they were actualized. This went far beyond the generally recognized right of sovereign states to act preemptively against imminent threats. The Bush Doctrine, as it became known, clearly warned that the United States would employ preventive war against potential threats, whether from rouge states, failed states, or non-state actors. In fact, as Thomas M. Nichols of the U.S. Naval War College clearly discusses in his book *Eve of Destruction*, this was not new with George W. Bush, but had emerged in the early days of the post-Cold War world. Whether undertaken in the name of humanitarian action, or more realistically because national interests were involved, this blurring of the lines laid down as part of the Westphalian (1648) Western major-state diplomatic sys-

tem was, according to Nichols, clearly evident during the administration of President William J. Clinton. Over the course of the past fifteen years, other states have either exercised or claimed the right to act preventively, including Russia and the Peoples' Republic of China.

I emphasize Western major states because the non-Western world (in particular) as well as minor states were often, at least in the pre-World War II era, the targets of preventive war waged by the major Western powers. Occasionally, major powers waged preventive war against each other. Nichols pointedly cites the Japanese attack on the United States in 1941 (by which time Japan had been admitted to the major power "club") as one such example. Since the Second World War, the collective security apparatus of the United Nations (UN) has at least nominally added all sovereign states to the formerly Western diplomatic system.

To this emerging trend of preventive war might be added the re-emergence of significant

non-state actors engaging in what was once known as “private war.” This is, again, something that the Westphalian system had hoped to relegate to the edges of diplomacy, and war-making. Terror groups, revolutionary groups, criminal gangs, and various other non-state actors have engaged in significant cross-border operations that rise to the level of acts of war. All of this has strained the old Westphalian order to the breaking point.

Nichols, like Colin S. Gray in *The Sheriff: America's Defense of the New World Order* (2004), examines possible options for how the United States in particular, and the major powers in general, will have to deal with this new geopolitical and diplomatic reality. Gray, who admittedly wrote well before the current economic crisis had begun to manifest itself to anyone but specialists, made the case for the United States acting alone if necessary, or with allies if possible, in order to protect at least Western interests. Nichols, however, endorses a restructured UN. He admits that the current UN is incapable of effectively acting to protect the world, or the interests of the West (particularly the United States) from the contagion of failed states, and the malice of rogue states. Nichols cites such things as the membership of such paragons of human rights as Libya and Zimbabwe in the UN Human Rights Commission. Nichols does lay out a possible set of reforms for the UN, including changing the veto process. Whether they could be successfully implemented is another question entirely. Personally, this reviewer does not think so. Nichols also explores other options, including regional organizations and groupings of similarly minded states, but in the end, rejects them as insufficient.

Nichols's book is not really a work of military history, although obviously it has implications for military historians. His grasp of diplomatic history, especially of recent diplomatic history, is sound, and his understanding of international relations theory and organizations is a strength of the work. Nichols develops and uses a variety of

sources, including many from both foreign governments and press organs. His notes, in themselves, can be fascinating reading.

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