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The USA and Counter-Proliferation

A New and Dubious Role for US Nuclear Weapons

HANS M. KRISTENSEN AND JOSHUA HANDLER*

1. Introduction

NUCLEAR WEAPONS are making a comeback – not in numbers, but in being. The almost 10 years of steady superpower reductions, beginning with the 1987 INF treaty, are slowing to a halt. Countries which previously pressed hard for more nuclear cuts have shifted their focus onto softer arms control issues, such as the Comprehensive Test Ban Treaty and the Fissile Materials Ban, which will not disarm nuclear weapons. Rather than anticipating further deep reductions, the USA and Russia are solidifying their nuclear weapon stockpiles and consolidating their nuclear weapons infrastructure. Particularly in the case of the USA, older weapon types are being phased out and modern designs are being maintained and upgraded. The nuclear weapon infrastructure is being modernized into a smaller, cheaper, and more sophisticated maintenance apparatus. This apparatus, referred to by the USA as 'the enduring nuclear stockpile', will consist of predetermined numbers and types of nuclear weapons that will make up the nuclear stockpile as far into the future as anyone can predict.

The Russian nuclear arsenal and to a lesser extent China's still serve as the main justification for US nuclear forces and remain the focus of US operational nuclear planning. However, in an important development, countering the proliferation of weapons of mass destruction in the Third World has also become an important rationale for US nuclear forces. This focus is providing new justifications for the US nuclear arsenal and developing or enhancing military counter-proliferation capabilities.

Even before the 1991 Gulf War, the US military began to examine the possibilities of using nuclear weapons for non-proliferation missions. The experi-

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ence with Iraq gave further impetus to these developments. As the proliferation of weapons of mass destruction became a hot issue for US military planners, all elements of the US military, including those involved in US nuclear planning against the Soviet Union/Russia, became more involved.

However, the nuclear component of US counter-proliferation efforts is very sensitive, and the formal US counter-proliferation initiative is a conventional program. 'I want to strongly emphasize', US Deputy Assistant Secretary for Counter-proliferation Policy Mitchell B. Wallerstein told *Air Force Magazine* in 1995, 'that counter-proliferation is fundamentally about finding nonnuclear solutions to these problems.... The United States is not looking to retarget our nuclear weapons'.[1] In spring 1995, when confronted with a report about the developments in US nuclear counter-proliferation policy,[2] US government officials disputed the findings. The US Assistant Secretary of Defense for International Security Policy, Ashton B. Carter, insisted that the USA was not expanding the role of its nuclear weapons.[3]

But despite such assurances, US nuclear forces are becoming involved in the counter-proliferation missions. Many hardware upgrades to US strategic forces which were already under way in the 1980s in response to developments in Soviet strategic forces are now being exploited for their counter-proliferation capability in the Third World. In addition, modifications to US non-strategic forces are taking place, partially justified by new counter-proliferation missions.

This article traces the latest developments in US nuclear thinking as they relate to using US nuclear weapons to counter the proliferation of weapons of mass destruction. It concludes by examining the implications these developments in US nuclear strategy have for non-proliferation and disarmament.

2. NUCLEAR COUNTER-PROLIFERATION

The horizontal proliferation of nuclear weapons has been a matter of international concern since the 1950s. Also, since then, the USA has contemplated using nuclear weapons in the Third World on an ad hoc basis, e.g. in Korea and Vietnam (although not in the context of dealing with weapons of mass destruction). Moreover, US nuclear planning did set aside a strategic reserve force against China and some smaller countries (Iran and North Korea) in the late 1980s to safeguard a decisive deterrence against potential adversaries in the aftermath of a large-scale nuclear exchange between Russia and the USA.[4] But the new development in US nuclear thinking that has occurred since then is that some small countries (Iran, Iraq, Libya, and North Korea) now have become potential targets in their own right – as proliferators of weapons of mass destruction.

The concept of targeting Third World proliferators first appeared in the Joint Chiefs of Staff's (JCS) Military Net Assessment report from March 1990, which pointed to 'increasingly capable Third World threats' as a new justification for maintaining US strategic and non-strategic nuclear weapons.[5] Defense Secretary Dick Cheney's June 1990 testimony before the Senate Appropriations Committee marked the first high-level reference to weapons of mass destruction as a rationale for keeping US nuclear weapons.[6] These statements were small but important early indications of a change in US nuclear thinking.

2.1 The Impact of Iraq

The disclosure of Iraq's clandestine nuclear weapons program accelerated the changes in US nuclear doctrine. The Gulf War had just ended when Defense Secretary Cheney issued the top-secret Nuclear Weapons Employment Policy (NUWEP), which formally tasked the military to plan for nuclear operations against nations capable of developing weapons of mass destruction.[7]

Military planners began to change the strategies accordingly. The JCS Joint Military Net Assessment of March 1991 specifically identified non-strategic nuclear weapons, such as the 480 nuclear bombs the USA continues to deploy in seven European countries,[8] as a class of weapons that 'could assume a broader role globally in response to the proliferation of nuclear capability among Third World nations'. The JCS report reminded, however, that nuclear proliferation necessitated an upgrade of the command, control, and communication (C^3) capabilities of US forces and identified the MILSTAR/SCOTT satellite communications systems as an example of such an upgrade.[9]

In a related move, the Strategic Air Command (SAC) established a Deterrence Study Group to examine the role of nuclear weapons in the post–Cold War era. The group became known as the Reed Panel, named after its chairman, former Air Force Secretary Thomas Reed, and concluded that nuclear weapons missions should be expanded, even against non-nuclear foes.[10]

These continuing developments in the Pentagon's thinking about countering weapons of mass destruction were reflected in the February 1992 Defense Department annual report, which stated that 'the possibility that Third World nations may acquire nuclear capabilities has led the Department to make adjustments to nuclear and strategic defense forces and to the policies that guide them'. US nuclear strategy, it said, 'must now also encompass potential instabilities that could arise when states or leaders perceive they have little to lose from employing weapons of mass destruction'.[11]

The adjustments the 1992 Defense Department annual report referred to included the JCS's Joint Strategic Capabilities Plan (JSCP) from 1992, which laid out current military objectives. The plan directed military planners to retarget US nuclear weapons beyond Russia and China to other countries developing weapons of mass destruction.[12]

The following year, in February 1993, the JCS was ready with a new Roles and Missions report. 'Deterring nuclear attack and containing communism have given way to a more diverse, flexible strategy which is regionally oriented', the report said.[13] 'Our focus now is not just the former Soviet Union', commander of SAC's successor Strategic Command (STRATCOM), General Lee Butler, echoed to the *New York Times*, 'but any potentially hostile country that has or is seeking weapons of mass destruction.'[14] STRATCOM began to plan how to change targets quickly against possible threats in geographical regions like North Korea, Iraq, Iran, and Libya. A new Joint Intelligence Center was created, in General Butler's words, 'to assess from STRATCOM's operational perspective the growing threat represented by the global proliferation of weapons of mass destruction'.[15]

The new phrase was 'adaptive planning',[16] a term also adopted in NATO nuclear planning. 'Adaptive planning challenges the headquarters to formulate plans very quickly in response to spontaneous threats which are more likely to emerge in a new international environment unconstrained by the Super Power stand-off', General Butler told *Jane's Defence Weekly*. Butler continued:

> We can accomplish this task by using generic targets, rather than identifying specific scenarios and specific enemies, and then crafting a variety of response options to address these threats. To ensure their completeness, these options consider the employment of both nuclear and conventional weapons. Thus, by its very nature, adaptive planning offers unique solutions, tailored to generic regional dangers involving weapons of mass destruction.[17]

The expansion of nuclear strategy to counter the proliferation of weapons of mass destruction was officially enshrined as military doctrine in April 1993 when the JCS issued its 'Doctrine for Joint Nuclear Operations' (Joint Pub 3-12). The document, in which STRATCOM is listed as the 'lead agent', concluded unambiguously that the purpose of US nuclear weapons is to 'deter the use of weapons of mass destruction, particularly nuclear weapons'. This, it said, 'should be the first priority' in regional contingencies. The document advocated the development of low-yield precision-guided nuclear weapons for possible retaliation use in regional wars to 'avoid destabilizing the conflict'.[18]

3. THE NUCLEAR POSTURE REVIEW – THE NUCLEAR MODERNIZATION

In September 1994, the Clinton Administration completed what it described as the most ambitious review of US nuclear weapons and nuclear planning in decades. In addition to the reductions in nuclear forces, the Pentagon said the Nuclear Posture Review (NPR) had changed the way it thinks about nuclear weapons and was reducing their role. Yet the review itself endorsed the expanded role of nuclear weapons to counter the proliferation of weapons of mass destruction.[19] Then-Deputy Secretary of Defense John Deutch explained to the Senate:

> An examination of the remaining nuclear threat from Russia and the non-Russian republics that possess nuclear weapons as well as the emerging threat from other countries around the world indicate that the United States will continue to need nuclear weapons for deterrence for the foreseeable future.[20]

The NPR is widely reported to provide only non-nuclear responses to hostile use of weapons of mass destruction (WMD) in regional conflicts. But nuclear weapons featured prominently in counter-proliferation roles, such as to 'deter WMD acquisition or use'. Moreover, several non-strategic nuclear weapons missions in support of the non-proliferation scenarios were deleted from the public record.[21]

4. Post-NPR Developments

STRATCOM was assigned to assist regional commands in drawing up the plans for nuclear war with Third World proliferators,[22] and one of the first projects was the Silver Book concept. The Silver Books were plans for military strikes against weapons of mass destruction facilities in a number of 'rogue' nations, such as Iran, Iraq, Libya, and North Korea. According to a highly classified STRATCOM paper released under the Freedom of Information Act, the Silver Books involved 'the planning associated with a series of "silver bullet" missions aimed at counter-proliferation'.[23] Targets included nuclear, chemical, biological, and command, control and communications (C^3) installations.[24]

Internal dispute between STRATCOM and the regional commands, however, abruptly ended STRATCOM's Silver Book endeavor in early 1995, when the JCS ordered STRATCOM to drop the project. Yet regional nuclear planning is very much alive and continues with the regional commands.[25] In May 1995, President Clinton revised the Unified Command Plan and assigned counter-proliferation as a military mission for the regional commanders in proliferant regions of the world,[26] e.g. Pacific Command and Central Command.

Meanwhile, STRATCOM continued to deal with overall nuclear planning and to refine the role of nuclear weapons against weapons of mass destruction. In April 1995, the Policy Subcommittee of STRATCOM's Strategic Advisory Group completed a new set of guidelines for deterrence against Third World proliferators such as Iran, Iraq, and North Korea. Providing a broader target base for countering such Third World proliferators was listed as a reason for recommending that the USA not reduce its nuclear weapons below START II levels of 3,500 accountable nuclear warheads.[27]

5. Credible Deterrence Means Credible Forces

Changing targets means upgrading weapon systems. In the mid-1980s, to respond to changes in Soviet nuclear forces (particularly, more mobile targets,

i.e., SS-24 and SS-25s ICBMs), to replace ageing systems, and to standardize others, the Air Force and the Navy had already planned for major upgrades to the Minuteman Inter-Continental Ballistic Missile (ICBM) and Trident Sea-Launched Ballistic Missile (SLBM)/Nuclear-Powered Strategic Submarine (SSBN) forces. By the late 1980s, rapid changes in Soviet nuclear forces due to the withdrawal from Eastern Europe and reductions in nuclear forces because of arms control agreements and economic factors led US nuclear planners to try to develop a capability to decrease the amount of time required to develop a new Single Integrated Operation Plan (SIOP).[28] These hardware developments, which allow US nuclear planners to more rapidly identify and strike targets in Russia, are also being used to provide the same capability globally.

The Navy is installing a new SLBM Retargeting System (SRS) that will enable Trident submarines 'to quickly, accurately, and reliably retarget missiles to targets' and 'to allow timely and reliable processing of an increased number of targets'.[29] The operational requirement for the SRS was defined in October 1989 (a month before the fall of the Berlin Wall). The program is being implemented in three phases, with phase III scheduled for completion in 1998–2002. The end result will help 'reduce overall SIOP processing' time and 'support adaptive planning'. Trident SSBNs at sea will have a greater capability to attack fixed and mobile sites.[30] Although originally conceived to allow Trident submarines to attack dispersed Soviet SS-24 rail-mobile and SS-25 road-mobile ICBMs, these technical improvements also provide new capabilities for dealing with new or mobile targets globally.

Similar developments are under way within the Air Force, which is spending more than USD 2 billion on upgrading its Minuteman III ICBMs through 2001. Part of this upgrade entails equipping the missiles with the Rapid Execution and Combat Targeting (REACT) system, which will provide 'rapid message processing [and] rapid re-targeting'.[31] The REACT program began in 1996 and is scheduled to be completed in 1998.[32] The Air Force is also upgrading its B-2 bombers. Conceived as a purely nuclear strike platform against the Soviet Union, the B-2 is being added to conventional capability to justify maintaining the expensive program and give the bomber a role in regional contingencies. Moreover, the B-2, whose numbers are being increased from 20 to 21 operational aircrafts by the upgrading of a test plane to a fully operational bomber,[33] will be the designated carrier of a new nuclear bomb[34] that appears to give the B-2 bomber a role in nuclear counter-proliferation missions.

The new nuclear bomb, called the B61 Mod 11, has capabilities that may link it to nuclear counter-proliferation scenarios because of its enhanced earth-penetration capability.[35] Although this capability is thought mainly to be linked to missions against targets in Russia, underground facilities are prominent nuclear targets in the Pentagon's counter-proliferation plan against 'rogue' nations.

6. LIBYA BECOMES A NUCLEAR COUNTER-PROLIFERATION TARGET

Despite repeated assurances by US officials (see above statements by Ashton Carter and Mitchell Wallerstein) that US counter-proliferation does not involve nuclear weapons, US officials hinted in early 1996 that possible military action against Libya's alleged underground chemical weapons plant at Tarhunah might involve the use of a nuclear bomb. 'We could not take [Tarhunah] out of commission using strictly conventional weapons', Assistant to the Secretary of Defense for Nuclear, Chemical and Biological Programs Harold P. Smith, Jr., said in April.[36] If there was a decision to destroy the plant, Smith said, the B61 Mod 11 'would be the nuclear weapon of choice'.[37]

Smith gave his statement during a breakfast interview with reporters after Defense Secretary William Perry told a Senate Foreign Relations Committee hearing on chemical and biological weapons that the USA retained the option of using nuclear weapons against the Tarhunah plant. The remarks caused widespread attention, and the Pentagon subsequently decided to retreat from its nuclear saber rattling. 'There is no consideration to using nuclear weapons, and any implication that we would use nuclear weapons preemptively against this plant is just wrong', said Pentagon spokesperson Ken Bacon. Nonetheless, doctrine prevailed and Bacon continued to keep the nuclear option open, adding that despite his denial, Washington did not rule out using nuclear weapons in response to a nuclear, chemical, or biological attack on the USA or its allies.[38]

7. NUCLEAR COUNTER-PROLIFERATION – DOES IT WORK?

Will nuclear counter-proliferation work to deter rogue countries from acquiring and using weapons of mass destruction, or are there other methods to curtail nuclear proliferation? The highly militarized case the admininstration suggests does not seem to work. Rather, the results seem to emerge from non-military efforts.

In the case of nuclear proliferation, the US government feels much progress has recently been made. In the words of US Assistant Secretary of Defense (International Security Policy) Ashton Carter:

> It is quite striking that since the beginning of this decade, we've seen no fewer than six countries that might have been nuclear powers now turned away from the path: Ukraine, Kazakhstan, Belarus, in the former Soviet Union – one of those nuclear-free now, the other two to become nuclear-free this year; North Korea turned, through the Framework Agreement, from a path to nuclear weapons to a path to freeze and eventual dismantlement; South Africa, much earlier in this decade, eliminated its nuclear weapon arsenal; and Iraq, which clearly had nuclear weapons, and before the war was on the path of nuclear proliferation.[39]

Except in the case of Iraq (examined below), these achievements have been accomplished by non-military means. A diplomatic or a voluntary effort on the part of the proliferant country, or a combination of the two, produced the desired result.

7.1 The 1991 Gulf War – Deterring Iraq?

If there was a case for deterring the use of weapons of mass destruction with US nuclear weapons, it might be found in the 1991 Gulf War with Iraq. However, the lessons which can be drawn are ambiguous.

The USA had hundreds of tactical nuclear weapons deployed on warships and air bases in the region during the 1991 Gulf War.[40] The weapons were not, however, deployed because of the war; they were present because nuclear weapons routinely carried on board US Navy warships were still on board when the ships sailed for war in the Persian Gulf. In addition, the Air Force and the Army had hundreds of nuclear bombs and artillery shells forward deployed in Turkey only a few hundred miles from the Iraqi border.

US military commanders did consider openly threatening to use nuclear weapons against Iraq but abandoned this idea, according to former US Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff Colin Powell, because the political costs outweighed any military gains.[41] The Bush Administration, however, never stated its decision in public, but 'purposely' left the impression with Iraqi leaders (and the public) at the final meeting between Iraqi Foreign Minister Tariq Aziz and US Secretary of State James Baker in January 1991 that Iraqi use of chemical or biological agents 'could invite tactical nuclear retaliation'.[42]

As it turned out, Iraq never used its chemical weapons in the war, and ever since it has remained unclear why. Were chemical weapons simply the wrong kind of weapon to use, or did Iraqi leaders not dare because they feared a US nuclear response? In August 1995, when chief UN arms inspector Rolf Ekeus returned from a visit to Iraq, the press reported that Iraqi officials had told Ekeus that they decided not to consider using chemical or biological weapons after James Baker's strong warning.[43] During the same month, the former Iraqi Minister of Defense, Hussein Kamel al-Majid, told *Time* magazine why he thought Iraq did not use chemical weapons: 'Any mistake of using these unconventional weapons will make the major powers use nuclear weapons, which means Iraq will be exterminated.'[44]

Aziz's and Kamel's statements seemingly vindicated the role of nuclear deterrence in counter-proliferation scenarios. However, when questioned about the press reports, Ekeus provided another interpretation of the Iraqi statements. In his view, they merely reflected what Iraq wanted the world to hear: a small country was being bullied by heavily armed nuclear powers. Rather, Iraq's decision not to use chemical weapons, he concluded, was based on a pragmatic military assessment that they were simply the wrong kind of weapon to use in that conflict.[45]

In a news briefing a few days later on 16 February, Defense Secretary William Perry also referred to Iraq's decision not to use chemical weapons. Like Ekeus, Perry was not certain what the reason was. 'It's an interesting consideration as to why they did not use them during that war, whether our counter-proliferation worked, namely the very great conventional force we had simply overwhelmed them, or whether they feared a response from nuclear weapons. Whatever the reason, they were deterred from using it', Perry stated.[46]

8. Conclusions – Nuclear Counter-Proliferation: Counter-productive

The evidence in favor of using nuclear weapons in counter-proliferation strategies is quite weak. There seem to be better, diplomatic ways for dealing with the countries that currently make up the top of the rogue nations list – Iran and Libya (with Iraq and North Korea having been partially dealt with). In fact, a nuclear counter-proliferation policy comes with some considerable drawbacks:

(1) The status and prestige of nuclear weapons in world politics and their own security situation have already provided ample reason for Israel, India, and Pakistan to acquire a nuclear capability. Iran and Libya started their nuclear efforts (like North Korea and Iraq) well before the end of the Cold War and still pursue nuclear programs for similar reasons. Military threats hardly ever produce disarmament but instead yield nationalistic and self-defense efforts. Specifically, holding the nuclear sword over the heads of Iran or Libya would seem to provide them with yet more encouragement to get a weapon of mass destruction.

(2) Nuclear counter-proliferation doctrines also undercut another non-proliferation effort: the creation of nuclear-weapon-free zones, an issue that is now a major US foreign policy objective. The new African Nuclear-Weapon-Free Zone had just been signed when US military leaders began talking about using nuclear weapons to destroy Libya's chemical weapons plant. And hundreds of US nuclear weapons are still forward deployed on air bases in seven European countries, including Greece, Italy, and Turkey, partly because of proliferation concern. Their presence and mission weaken the overall impact of the African Nuclear-Weapon-Free Zone and undercut efforts to create a zone in the Middle East region.

(3) Countering WMD also represents a much broader mission for nuclear weapons than even during the Cold War. WMD refers not only to nuclear weapons but also to chemical and biological weapons as well as the missiles to deliver them. Therefore, US nuclear forces could ostensibly be used in a nuclear strike against a non-nuclear country, for example Libya, as long as it is armed with chemical or biological weapons.

But using nuclear weapons to counter WMD is in conflict with a long-term US pledge not to use nuclear weapons against non-nuclear countries. This policy has been in effect since 1978 and was most recently reaffirmed in April

1995 when the nuclear powers jointly announced that they would not attack (with nuclear weapons) non-nuclear countries party to the 1970 Non-Proliferation Treaty (NPT). The pledge was an important factor in gaining support from non-nuclear countries at the May 1995 Review and Extension Conference of the NPT.[47]

(4) Nuclear counter-proliferation plans are also another obstacle to further nuclear disarmament. Although Russian nuclear forces are the main justification for US nuclear forces, the prominent reference by US military leaders to the proliferation of weapons of mass destruction becomes an important political argument for continued spending on nuclear weapons. Countering such global threats – i.e., the proliferation of weapons of mass destruction – is already being used as a rhetorical and political justification for nuclear weapons upgrades already under way.

Confronting proliferators with nuclear weapons is a contradictory and risky endeavor. It holds the inauspicious prospects of increased 'North–South' nuclear antagonism, can encourage rather than discourage proliferators from going nuclear, threatens to undercut the efforts to reduce the role of nuclear weapons in the post–Cold War era and slows the drawdown of existing nuclear arsenals. Also, there are more and better non-nuclear options for countering proliferation (as evidenced in the Pentagon by an emphasis on conventional counter-proliferation).

The contradiction would not be so apparent if the official denials were not so emphatic. The US government reassures that it is not changing its nuclear targets beyond Russia and China, but the record shows developments in US military nuclear thinking and planning that suggest the contrary. The changes in nuclear thinking and planning are more the product of bottom-up inputs into nuclear weapon strategies for the new international security environment than the result of top-down presidential decisions. This is not reassuring. Bureaucratic imperatives were key drivers in the 50 years of the nuclear arms race. Unless the highest levels of the US government give clear direction to the process soon, countering proliferation promises to become a pillar in another arms race.

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* Hans M. Kristensen is a military and foreign affairs analyst, San Francisco, and a member of the Danish Defense Commission. Joshua Handler works at the Woodrow Wilson School of Public Policy, Princeton University, New Jersey.

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