

A Less than Grand Strategy: NATO's New Vision, The Preemptive Use of Nuclear Weapons

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Global Research, March 21, 2008
21 March 2008

Theme: [US NATO War Agenda](#)

In-depth Report: [Nuclear War](#)

A few months ago, a report was published entitled "Towards a Grand Strategy for an Uncertain World: Renewing Transatlantic Partnership". It was written by five generals and it proposes a new vision for the NATO alliance and a strengthening of ties between the United States and the European Union. The report outlines the major security threats facing the world today and it asserts that NATO, in spite of its shortcomings, remains the most effective body for confronting these threats. The five generals outline a strategy for NATO to adopt in its effort to make the world a more "certain" place and for ensuring the dominance of the Western world in global security matters.

The report contains some shocking and alarming statements which demand further attention and analysis. The most unnerving idea put forth is that the preemptive use of nuclear weapons must remain in the NATO toolkit as a viable option for confronting entities which pose an "imminent threat" to global security. The following passages taken from the report clearly illustrate this point:

"The first use of nuclear weapons must remain in the quiver of escalation as the ultimate instrument to prevent the use of weapons of mass destruction, in order to avoid truly existential dangers."

"What is needed is a policy of deterrence by proactive denial, in which preemption is a form of reaction when a threat is imminent, and prevention is the attempt to regain the initiative in order to end the conflict."

"Regrettably, nuclear weapons – and with them the option of first use – are indispensable, since there is simply no realistic prospect of a nuclear-free world. On the contrary, the risk of further proliferation is imminent and, with it, the danger that nuclear war fighting, albeit limited in scope, might become possible. This development must be prevented. It should therefore be kept in mind that technology could produce options that go beyond the traditional role of nuclear weapons in preventing a nuclear armed opponent from using nuclear weapons. In sum, nuclear weapons remain indispensable, and nuclear escalation continues to remain an element of any modern strategy."

In short, the publication suggests that NATO should adhere to the Bush administration's credo of "strike first" and that the definition of "proportional" can, and must, include the use of tactical nuclear weapons. The flawed logic is that the Western world should be prepared to use nuclear weapons in order to prevent their "enemies" from developing and/or using those same weapons. It goes without saying that that this position carries with it a whole host of problems. The following issues immediately spring to mind:

1) The naive belief that “mini-nukes” are somehow a safe and proportional response to perceived threats is an unproven and frightening proposition which contains the potential to plunge the world into a nuclear holocaust. Reducing parts of the world to a massive laboratory where NATO will bomb first and assess the accuracy of their beliefs in retrospect is frightening indeed. It’s hard to imagine a scenario in which the use of nuclear weapons would not have grave implications for civilian casualties and massive environmental contamination. The report also offers no comforting assurances that other nations who are “allies” of the targeted country would not respond to the use of nuclear weapons by retaliating in kind.

2) A policy of preemptive use eliminates any real notion of deterrence. If a government felt it was being targeted for attack or regime change, what incentive would there be for that nation to refrain from striking first with WMD’s or any other means at their disposal? In addition, what incentive would there be for these nations to refrain from forming strategic alliances with terrorist organizations which may help them retaliate in the event of an attack? If anything, the whole notion of preemptive strikes serves to make the world a less certain and stable place.

3) It’s difficult to imagine a scenario where this policy would not, in fact, encourage the proliferation of weapons of mass destruction (and weapons of all kinds). Common sense suggests that nations who feel cornered would likely adopt an attitude of, “If we’re gonna be hit, lets make sure we can hit back.”

4) The publication does not address the long-term implications of a preemptive attack. Decapitating the leadership of a nation and laying waste to its terrain does not provide any reason to hope that from the ashes of such a calamity would emerge a model state which would pose no further threat to the Western world. The American invasion and subsequent occupation of Iraq, without the use of nuclear weapons, should illustrate the dangers inherent in this philosophy. Would a nuclear attack on Iran, for example, be based on “intelligence” that was also completely erroneous and deceptive? The world is not any safer as a result of the invasion of Iraq. Adding nuclear weapons to the mix would only make the situation worse from a humanitarian and security perspective.

These issues are only those that spring to mind from a “layperson’s” perspective. Other analysts with a more sophisticated understanding of the issue could likely demonstrate innumerable problems with the doctrine of preemptive use. At a basic level, the idea is simply counter intuitive and seemingly immoral. The argument seems devoid of all reason and logic and carries with it some very grave risks for the future of humanity.

The report itself contains other flaws and arguments which only serve to polarize groups and nations and move us further from a spirit of co-operation and understanding. The publication also contains messages that wreak of cultural superiority and arrogance. For example, the report states that, “In some Western societies, faith in purely irrational belief systems has overtaken belief in religions that have moral and rational substance, as well as cultural roots. But symptoms such as the decline of interest in science reflect an intellectual decline that might have more immediately palpable social consequences in areas such as journalism, law, and even public health. It reflects a more general loss of respect for the value of evidence and argument. As a direct consequence of the globalisation of information flows, all kinds of irrational belief or political fanaticism circulate freely in the public domain.” Have the generals who prepared this report elevated themselves to the status of

experts on which religions are moral and contain “rational substance”? Are they suggesting that religions that are not homogeneous with “traditional” Western belief systems are somehow inferior and contributing to “intellectual decline”? The suggestion, only slightly veiled, is clear and it’s obnoxious.

The report further states that, “If the irrational and fanatical get out of hand, there is a risk that, in the long term, the instability of uncertainties, the rise of fundamentalisms and despotisms will usher in a new, illiberal age, in which the liberties that Western societies enjoy – but will not defend – are seriously jeopardised”. If the authors had not displayed a clear bias in this report, the reader might be tempted to imagine that they are referring to neo-conservatism and not the Islamic faith.

The author’s of the report explore, at great length, the challenges that they perceive as constituting the greatest threats to global security. Unfortunately, they completely ignore the greatest threat to stability and harmony on the planet: poverty. Their complete failure to address this issue in any depth makes it difficult to give the report, as a whole, any credibility. Any discussion of global security must take poverty into account. The widening gap between those who have more than enough and those who have less than they need must be central to any discussion on global security and making the world a safer place for everyone.

On the whole, the report contains an unabashed support for increased militarism and an arrogant endorsement of continuing Western hegemony throughout the world. The “Western way of life” must be preserved at all costs and those groups and/or nations which pose a threat to Western dominance must be wiped off the face of the earth. For these, and other reasons, the report is disturbing and presents a strategy which is something far less than grand. It is time for military leaders, security elites, and Western governments to engage in a level of thoughtfulness, creativity, consultation, and broad-mindedness which might result in perspectives that truly serve to unify the nations of the world and create greater harmony among its populations. No-one likes a bully and this report simply encourages the Western world to continue to threaten other nations into submission and to destroy them when they will not bow down. For the rest of the world, these bullies are not just after your lunch money. They are after your culture, your beliefs, your resources, your right to self-determination, your territory, and, ultimately, your life.

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