

Pentagon Foresees Preemptive Nuclear Strikes

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Amid increasing tension between the United States and Iran over Tehran's nuclear program, and growing concern about overstretched U.S. ground forces, the George W. Bush administration is moving steadily toward adopting the preemptive use of nuclear weapons against non-nuclear states as an integral part of its global military strategy.

According to a March document by the Joint Chiefs of Staff that was recently posted to the Pentagon's Web site, Washington will not necessarily wait for potential adversaries to use what it calls "weapons of mass destruction" before resorting to a nuclear strike against them.

The document, entitled "[Doctrine for Joint Nuclear Operations](#) [.pdf]," has yet to be approved by Pentagon chief Donald Rumsfeld, according to an [account published in Sunday's Washington Post](#). However, it is largely consistent with the administration's 2002 Nuclear Posture Review (NPR), which was widely assailed by arms control advocates for lowering the threshold for the use of nuclear weapons by the U.S.

"What we see as significant is that they are considering using nuclear weapons against non-nuclear powers in preemptive first strikes," said Ivan Oelrich of the Federation for American Scientists (FAS) about both the NPR and the new Doctrine.

The Doctrine would also appear to contradict the administration's oft-stated claim that it is significantly reducing the role of nuclear weapons in its global military strategy.

"[T]he new doctrine reaffirms an aggressive nuclear posture of modernized nuclear weapons maintained on high alert," according to Hans Kristensen of the Natural Resources Defense Council (NRDC).

"[T]he new doctrine's approach grants regional nuclear-strike planning an increasingly expeditionary aura that threatens to make nuclear weapons just another tool in the toolbox," he wrote last week in *Arms Control Today*.

"The result is nuclear preemption, which the new doctrine enshrines into official U.S. joint nuclear doctrine for the first time, where the objective no longer is deterrence through threatened retaliation but battlefield destruction of targets," according to Kristensen.

The Doctrine is the latest in a series of documents adopted by the administration that has moved the U.S. away from the traditional view that nuclear weapons should be used solely for the purposes of defense and deterrence.

Along with the NPR, which called for the development of new delivery systems for nuclear

weapons and noted that China, North Korea, Iraq, Iran, Syria, and Libya could all be targets, the new view was expounded by Bush himself in his September 2002 National Security Strategy document. "We cannot let our enemies strike first," he warned at the time.

In mid-2004, according to national security analyst William Arkin, Rumsfeld approved a top-secret "Interim Global Strike Alert Order" that directed the military to be prepared to attack potential adversaries, notably Iran and North Korea, that are developing WMD.

"Global strike," according to a classified January 2003 presidential directive obtained by Arkin, is defined as including nuclear, as well as conventional, strikes "in support of theater and national objectives."

The new document is the first to spell out various contingencies in which a preemptive nuclear strike might be used, including:

- If an adversary intended to use WMD against the U.S. multinational or allied forces or a civilian population;
- In cases of an imminent attack from an adversary's biological weapons that only effects from nuclear weapons can safely destroy;
- Against adversary installations, including WMD; deep, hardened bunkers containing chemical or biological weapons; or the command-and-control infrastructure required for the adversary to execute a WMD attack against the U.S. or its friends and allies; and
- In cases where a demonstration of U.S. intent and capability to use nuclear weapons would deter WMD use by an adversary.

The previous Doctrine, promulgated under the Clinton administration in 1995, made no mention of the preemptive use of nuclear weapons against any target, let alone describe scenarios in which such use would be considered.

Moreover, the new Doctrine blurs the distinction that existed during the Cold War between strategic and theater nuclear weapons by "assign[ing] all nuclear weapons, whether strategic or nonstrategic, support roles in theater nuclear operations," according to Kristensen.

Another particularly worrisome aspect of the latest Doctrine, according to Oelrich, is its conflation of biological, chemical and nuclear weapons as one "WMD" threat that could justify a U.S. nuclear strike, particularly given the huge disparity in destructive and lethal impact between chemical weapons, on the one hand, and nuclear arms on the other.

"What we are seeing now is an effort to lay the foundations for the legitimacy of using nuclear weapons if [the administration] suspects another country might use chemical weapons against us," he said. "Iraq is a perfect example of how this doctrine might actually work; it was a country where we were engaged militarily and thought it would deploy chemical weapons against us."

Critics also fear that resorting to nuclear weapons may have become increasingly attractive

to the administration as the Army and Marines have become bogged down in Iraq and, to a lesser extent, Afghanistan.

“[U.S. Strategic Command] planners, recognizing that U.S. ground forces are already overcommitted, say that a global strike must be able to be implemented ‘without resort to large numbers of general purpose forces,’” according to Arkin’s account of recent directives received by commanders charged with contingency planning.

The new strategy may also be relevant to the situation in Iran, which is known to have chemical weapons but whose nuclear program Washington insists is being used to produce weapons as well.

Writing in [The American Conservative](#) last month, columnist Philip Giraldi, a former CIA officer who also worked at the Defense Intelligence Agency, reported that Vice President Dick Cheney’s office had tasked the United States Strategic Command with drawing up a contingency plan for a “large-scale air assault on Iran employing both conventional and tactical nuclear weapons” in the event of another 9/11 terrorist attack.

“Many of the targets are hardened or are deep underground and could not be taken out by conventional weapons, hence the nuclear option,” he wrote.

In fact, it is questionable whether even U.S. nuclear weapons could reach their hardened targets underground, which is why the Pentagon has been pressing Congress for several years to finance research into the development of the so-called Robust Nuclear Earth Penetrator.

Democrats and a small minority of Republicans in the House of Representatives have so far blocked the administration’s request, although it will be taken up later this fall by a joint House-Senate conference committee. The new Strategy may be aimed in part at exerting pressure on the lawmakers to approve the request.

Meanwhile, however, administration critics warn that instead of deterring potential adversaries from pursuing nuclear weapons, the new Doctrine is almost certain to have the opposite effect.

“We make it seem that nuclear weapons are essential to our security,” noted Oelrich. “So it immensely enhances the cachet of nuclear weapons to others.”

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