

The Imperial Nuclear Order

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The nuclear order that is sought to be established after the fall of the Soviet Union leaves countries such as Iran easy prey.

In the event that the U.S. does decide to go nuclear, there is no power to stop it.

THE possibility of a nuclear strike by the United States against Iran has now entered mainstream political discourse in the U.S. This needs to be seen in the perspective of:

-U.S. determination to attack Iran but the virtual impossibility of achieving all its objectives through non-nuclear means;

-the predominance, at the highest levels of the Bush administration, of men who believe that problems of a global war and the consequent overstretch can and should be resolved by deploying “mini-nukes” – not retreat, but escalation to a higher level;

-the much wider spread of actual nuclear weapons among the key U.S. allies than is ever revealed in the mainstream media; and, most crucially,

-the immense nuclear superiority the U.S. has kept gaining since the collapse of the Soviet Union and the consequent doctrine of “usable nukes” it has developed during the Bush presidency.

Using nuclear weapons becomes thinkable because the U.S. has unrivalled capacity to do so, without any fear of retaliation either from its victims, Iran for instance, or Russia with its degraded arsenal and China with its very rudimentary capacity.

Hersh Bowls a Yorker

“The Iran Plans”, an article by Seymour M. Hersh, published in the April 17, 2006, issue of *The New Yorker*, has drawn great international attention. This is salutary and unsurprising. Hersh has been one of America’s ace reporters for some 35 years, ever since he broke the story of the My Lai massacre in Vietnam, which electrified U.S. opinion against that war and won him a Pulitzer Prize. He was the first to document the White House deceptions on Saddam Hussein’s purported weapons of mass destruction (WMDs) and the first to break the horrific story of all manner of torture in the Abu Ghraib prison in U.S.-occupied Iraq. His

book, *The Chain of Command: The Road from 9/11 to Abu Ghraib*, is one of the more riveting and revealing accounts of the Bush administration's imperial misdeeds. Meanwhile, *The New Yorker* is the most prestigious of America's mass circulation, glossy magazines, read by the Bold and the Beautiful, the rich and the powerful, the literati and the glitterati. In an earlier article, "The Coming Wars: What the Pentagon Can Now Do in Secret", in the January 24/31, 2005, issue of the magazine, Hersh had confirmed that the planning for an invasion of Iran was in advanced stages and that Defence Secretary Donald Rumsfeld had devised ways of keeping the scope of the preparations secret from even the U.S. Congress.

RAHEB HOMAVANDI/REUTERS



The Nuclear Power plant in Bushehr in southwestern Iran.

What is most significant about this new article is, again, the man who wrote it and the magazine which published it. Virtually every point he makes has been well known but Hersh gets high officials to speak them out, and even when he refuses to divulge his actual source (which is most of the time), he commands sufficient authority not to be questioned as to the impeccable nature of his sources and his accuracy in reporting them. Hersh is no leftist. He is a straightforward American patriot, in the mould of the late I.F. Stone, but politically even less radical. He is revolted by the fact that his government, leader of "the free world", tells so many lies, commits so many atrocities, all around the world, so punctually. So, he hunts down the lies and the atrocities. The regime of systematic torture that was revealed in the Abu Ghraib revelations is, in his opinion, the inevitable consequence of the global "war on terror" that the Bush administration has been waging, in violation of all international law and civilised behaviour. An impending attack on Iran, possibly using nuclear weapons, is, he believes, part of this inexorable logic. Rumsfeld, he seems to suggest, is a dangerously egomaniacal, power-hungry, mad man.

Hersh's main finding is that the top political leaders of the U.S., going right up to Vice-President Dick Cheney, are seriously considering the use of the so-called "tactical" nuclear weapons, including deep-penetration, bunker-busting nukes, in a massive assault on Iran. I seem to recall a similar finding by William Arkin, the prestigious military analyst, in a report he filed with *The Washington Post* about a year ago. I have a copy, in any case, of an article entitled "Attack on Iran: Pre-emptive Nuclear War", by Philip Giraldi, a former Central Intelligence Agency (CIA) officer, which was published in the August 2005 issue of the *American Conservative*, where he said that Cheney had instructed the Pentagon to prepare a massive assault against some 450 sites in Iran and be prepared to use those so-called "usable nukes" in case a second 9/11 were to occur in the U.S.; Iran would be invaded immediately, whatever the facts. Deducing from the very logic of new nuclear policies and operational planning being put in place, Foad Khosmood, an Iranian-born Professor of Physics at the University of California in San Diego, had flatly written in October 2005 that the "strategic decision by the United States to nuke Iran was probably made long ago". In a number of articles available on the web site of GlobalResearch ("Nuclear War against Iran", January 2006; "The Dangers of a Middle East Nuclear War", February 17, 2006; "Is the Bush Administration Planning a Nuclear Holocaust?", February 22, 2006), Michel Chossudovsky, Professor of Economics at the University of Ottawa, has been detailing all this at some length, to the effect that such a plan has been "in a state of readiness" since at least June 2005 and that one of the main such weapons under consideration for use, the B61, was developed during the Clinton years specifically for use in West Asia. Some of what I write in the concluding section of this piece is owed to authors such as these.



A United Nations Security Council session in March in New York, listening to the Argentinian Ambassador speaking on Iran's nuclear programme.

What Hersh seems to have done is to collate all this information and confronted highly placed officials with it, to elicit their response. Why did these officials speak frankly and confirm those reports? First, because Hersh was the reporter involved now, a formidable figure in American public life and one who could be trusted to protect the identity of his interlocutors. But there might also be a deeper reason. Giraldi had already noted that "several senior Air Force officers involved in the planning are reportedly appalled at the implications of what they are doing - that Iran is being set up for an unprovoked nuclear attack - but no one is prepared to damage his career by posing any objections". Now Hersh reports that the military brass is sceptical of these nuclear plans and his highly placed informant has told him that "the Joint Chiefs had agreed to give President Bush a formal recommendation stating that they are strongly opposed to considering the nuclear option for Iran". The decision of some highly placed officials to speak to Hersh and let their views be publicly known may well be part of this expression of dissent.

That dissent is one side of the story. However, the same Pentagon adviser who volunteered information regarding dissent by the Joint Chiefs also told Hersh that the idea of using nuclear weapons in such situations, where Iran had dispersed its nuclear labs widely and so fortified some of them as to make them secure against conventional attack, has gained support from the Defence Science Board, "an advisory panel whose members are selected by Secretary of Defence Donald Rumsfeld". Hersh's own comment on this is worth reporting in full:

"The chairman of the Defence Science Board is William Schneider, Jr., an Under-Secretary of State in the Reagan Administration. In January, 2001, as President Bush prepared to take office, Schneider served on an ad-hoc panel on nuclear forces sponsored by the National Institute for Public Policy, a conservative think tank. The panel's report recommended treating tactical nuclear weapons as an essential part of the U.S. arsenal and noted their suitability 'for those occasions when the certain and prompt destruction of high priority targets is essential and beyond the promise of conventional weapons'. Several signers of the report are now prominent members of the Bush Administration, including Stephen Hadley, the National Security Adviser; Stephen Cambone, the Under Secretary of Defence for Intelligence; and Robert Joseph, the Under Secretary of State for Arms Control and International Security."

As Khosmood points out, this list should actually be headed by Dick Cheney, who was the architect of new nuclear weapons policies back in 1992 to target non-nuclear states, and Donald Rumsfeld, whose conception of a smaller high-tech army, to replace the present-day army with huge manpower requirements, relies heavily on the willingness to use certain categories of nuclear weapons. The most chilling part of the adviser's comments to Hersh is that while military professionals are much more aware of the human and ecological costs of nuclear weapons use, within Iran and in the region as a whole, the civilian ideologues and men of authority appear to be mesmerised by the military effectiveness of such weapons and indifferent to the human disasters they cause. In this context, we might recall that in the U.S. system of the chain of nuclear command now in place, the authority to use such weapons rests with the President but, once made, the decision goes not through the Joint

Chiefs but from the civilian leadership to the field commanders. Bush could almost literally call Gen. Abizaid in the field and say “Nuke Them”.

The “Usable Nuke”

There is a certain logic to the possible American use of nuclear weapons against Iran. As we have pointed out time and again (See “Imperialism’s second strike” and “Iran: What’s at stake”; *Frontline*, October 21 and November 4, 2005), Iran is the real prize in the current war on West Asia. With countries like Saudi Arabia, Egypt and Jordan in the American pocket, with Syria greatly weakened, and with Afghanistan and Iraq vanquished, Iran is the only remaining obstacle in the way of unchallenged and unchallengeable U.S.-Israeli hegemony in the region. As the U.S. sinks into a quagmire in Iraq while Iran gains much influence there, a powerful body of opinion in and around the White House now exists that a direct assault on Iran and consequent weakening of it is essential if the U.S. is to stabilise its position even in Iraq. The great pressure from Israel for the U.S. to act – and act quickly as well as decisively – is of course there. More recently, a formidable combination of Arab/Sunni client regimes, from Saudi Arabia and Jordan to Egypt and Algeria, has arisen to warn the U.S. that it (and they), face the gruesome prospect of what the Jordanian king calls “the rise of a Shia crescent” led by Iran and comprised of its allies in Iraq as well as the restive, pro-Iranian Shia populations in Lebanon, Bahrain, Kuwait, the eastern provinces of Saudi Arabia and elsewhere; bombing Iran back to Stone Age is the only solution. But why nuclear weapons? Why not “Shock and Awe” of the sort we witnessed in the case of Iraq, just on a much grander scale?

The objective that governs the policy decisions regarding use of the so-called “tactical” nuclear weapons against Iran shall be essentially the same as in the case of the Hiroshima and Nagasaki bombs: obtaining a quick surrender by a still powerful enemy which would now be facing savage, overwhelming, unanswerable power. The U.S. knows that at the end of an eight-year war that took a million lives, Iran eventually sued for peace only when Saddam Hussein started spraying the Irani ground forces with chemical and biological weapons from the air, indiscriminately, for which Iran had no answer. This past experience provides a further impetus for nuclear escalation, all the way. The immediate argument being trotted out (with or without evidence, even against a great deal of evidence) by the weaponeers is (a) that Iran has nuclear facilities buried so deep that the most powerful of the conventional bombs cannot penetrate and (b) that the modern-day, new-generation mini-nukes are “safe for the civilian population”. This conception of a “safe-for-civilian nuke” is actually no more credible today than the claim President Harry Truman made about the safety of nuclear bombs when he was about to use them in Hiroshima and Nagasaki:

“We have discovered the most terrible bomb in the history of the world. It may be the fire destruction prophesied in the Euphrates Valley Era, after Noah and his fabulous Ark.... This weapon is to be used against Japan.... [We] will use it so that military objectives and soldiers and sailors are the target and not women and children. Even if the Japs are savages, ruthless, merciless and fanatic, we as the leader of the world for the common welfare cannot drop that terrible bomb on the old capital or the new. ... The target will be a purely military one.”



I owe this quotation from Truman's diary to Professor Chossudovsky, in whose essay I found it. The rhetoric is eerie in any case: full awareness of the awesomeness of the weapon; the self-congratulatory image of the U.S. "as the leader of the world for the common good" even as the decision is being made to perpetrate pure evil; the racist belief that the confrontation is between the civilised Western Self and the "savage, ruthless" Oriental; and the claim, committed to a diary, that the "target is a purely military one" where women and children shall not suffer. We know what actually happened in Hiroshima, and it is worth reiterating that the so-called "mini-nukes" that are slated to be used one of these days have a capacity about two-thirds of the one that was dropped on Hiroshima. "Usable"? "Safe for civilians"?

Iran's Capacities

But why not a much grander "Shock and Awe" through the so-called "conventional" weapons? And why Iran? The answer to this would have to address two questions: why is invasion necessary in the first place? And why does invasion have any reasonable chance of success only if the nuclear option stays on the table and may indeed be exercised? We have stated some of the factors impelling the U.S. to invade Iran. Furthermore, unlike Iraq, Iran cannot be softened and broken through sanctions. The unilateral, U.S.-imposed sanctions, which have been in place since 1979 in one shape or another, have simply not worked; with unbearable U.S. pressure, China and Russia may agree to some kind of limited sanctions imposed by the Security Council but such sanctions are unlikely to do any great damage to Iran because most states will find ways of bypassing them.

Iran is just too rich in oil and gas, too attractive a destination for spectacular investments for the governments and corporates of the world to abstain voluntarily from grand-scale profiteering. The U.S. would actually welcome the Security Council's failure to impose sanctions, so that it can invade unilaterally while citing what it would undoubtedly call "the failure of the international community to act effectively". The U.S. could then opt for targeted bombings to destroy Iran's nuclear facilities, but the problem is that the facilities are too widely dispersed, some of them too well fortified - the one in Isfahan too close to a major city; full success even in this limited objective is not assured and Iran is likely to retaliate, in Iraq, against the U.S. naval ships in the region, by trying to close the Straits of Hormuz, which is barely six miles wide at its narrowest point and wholly vulnerable to Irani vessels and missiles.

At that point, the U.S. shall have to decide between a stand-off and massive escalation. U.S. military contingency plans that are the most popular with the country's leaders call for destruction of some 450 targets of military value in Iran, as well as shipyards, power grids, road networks, refineries, and so on. We do not know how successful Iran shall be in closing the Hormuz, choking off the world's oil supplies and pushing oil prices higher and higher, well above \$100 a barrel; how populations outside Iran shall respond; what the role of Israel shall be. Too many things are unpredictable.

What is clear, however, is that the U.S. is incapable of mounting an effective land invasion. Its troops are fully pinned down in Iraq, with no end in sight, and there just are not more troops to occupy a country three times the geographical and demographic size of Iraq, as well as much wealthier, much more cohesive and stable. Iran is not a democracy as we understand democracy in India, but it is democratic enough for Mahmoud Ahmadinejad, a young Mayor of Teheran, to have won the presidency, beating Akbar Hashemi Rafsanjani, every columnist's favoured candidate, in an upset victory which no political commentator of

any standing had predicted. The country is ruled by a dispensation of breathtaking social conservatism, but modern education under this same dispensation has expanded enormously and Iran is the only country where women outnumber men in institutions of higher learning.

AP



Ayatollah Ali Khamenei has said Iran will respond “double-fold” to any attack by the U.S.

CIA reports suggest that Iran is able to mobilise a fighting force of up to 12 million, which is considerably more than the 50,000 or so who are said to be fighting off the Americans in Iraq. There are immense disaffections against the ruling dispensation in Iran but every poll has suggested that over 80 per cent of Iranians support their government in the confrontation with the U.S. Similarly, the ruling establishment in Iran is deeply divided into factions but all factions are basically agreed on issues of national security, sovereignty, nuclear policy and even the main features of foreign policy; the moderation of the moderates evaporates as soon as Iran is threatened from outside.

I might add that Iran is a country traumatised by the war that Saddam Hussein initiated against it and which dragged on for eight years; President Ahmadinejad belongs to the generation that came of age during that war and bore the brunt of it. These men were on the battlefield when their forces were sprayed with lethal gases. They suffered the humiliation of their government entreating the United Nations to help prevent this open use of WMDs and the U.S. making sure that the so-called “international community” remained passive while Saddam had his day with his WMDs, which the West had helped him develop. The U.S. campaign against Saddam’s WMDs came much later. Meanwhile, Iran learned a bitter lesson: never to allow itself to be a helpless victim of other people’s weapons of mass destruction. Its own nuclear weapons programme, if it has any, stems from that trauma. The paradox here is that nuclear weapons are slated to be used against a non-nuclear state on the pretext that it may obtain nuclear capability at some future date, through a weaponisation programme it may not even have.

The U.S. is faced with a historic dilemma. It can either allow its main adversary in West Asia to prosper, pursue its objectives in Iraq and elsewhere in the region, to cement its alliances with China and Russia, build its military forces, float an alternative oil bourse in Teheran to challenge the dollar’s supremacy in oil trade, emerge as the lynchpin of the projected Asian Energy Security Grid, rise to be a dominant power in West Asia at par with Israel, and possibly acquire nuclear weapon capacity. Or it can act swiftly and devastatingly to prevent all that. Israelis, at least, are arguing that with rudimentary stages of uranium enrichment accomplished up to mere 2 per cent or 3 per cent, with barely 150 centrifuges, Iran is now on its way to enrich uranium to weapon grade level within a year or so. The time to destroy it all is NOW. After the inconclusive September vote when the E.U.-U.S. combine won the vote (as well as something of a moral victory thanks to India’s defection from the non-aligned position) but the Board of the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA) failed to report Iran to the U.N. Security Council, Israel issued an ultimatum: either Iran is hauled before the Security Council with a view to imposing sanctions by March 31, 2006, or Israel shall feel free to undertake military strikes. The IAEA, as well as the so-called “international community”, dutifully complied.

Taking the hint from the U.S., electronic media around the globe are pretending that there is now a Security Council resolution demanding from Iran that it cease uranium enrichment of all kinds and comply with all sorts of demands. In fact, what came out was an utterly non-binding “presidential statement”, not a resolution, precisely because there is no legal basis for the demand that Iran cease all enrichment activity indefinitely. Iran has turned down the demand, and the U.S., its allies and mouthpieces in the media are busy portraying this as a violation of a Security Council Resolution, and even Mohammed ElBaradei, the IAEA Director-General, may certify that Iran is now “in breach” of a (non-existent) Security Council resolution. What then? Will Russia, which actually plays the pivotal role in running several of Iran’s nuclear facilities, agree to sanctions being imposed on its ally, Iran, which refines some of Russia’s oil, for shipping through the Straits of Hormuz on competitive prices? Will Russia and China promote and comply with such sanctions and jeopardise hundreds of billions of dollars in their contracts and investments? And if they do not, will the inability of the Security Council to pass such a resolution give the U.S. the excuse to invade, citing “inaction” on part of “the international community”? The time of testing is at hand, but it is too soon to predict.

There shall either be no American, Israeli or U.S.-Israeli military strike against Iran in the foreseeable future, or the logic of such a strike may inexorably lead toward the use of nuclear weapons by the U.S., Israel or both. A scenario very difficult for Iran shall be the one where it faces air strikes from Israel, which has overwhelming superiority in air and possesses nuclear weapons as well, while the U.S. power is assembled close to Iran’s borders and shores but not used. How does Iran defend itself, and retaliate? And against whom? Much expert opinion seems to suggest that if the nukes come, they will come after the first round of strikes and Iran’s response to them. Is there anything Iran can do to prevent such an attack? What Hersh writes on this question is significant: “A discouraged former IAEA official told me in late March that, at this point, `there’s nothing the Iranians could do that would result in a positive outcome. American diplomacy does not allow for it. Even if they announce a stoppage of enrichment, nobody will believe them. It’s a dead end’.”

Faith-based accusation

Does Iran even have a nuclear weapons programme at all? Like the proverbial “Beauty”, this programme appears to be mainly in the eye of the beholder, which is what comes through in sentences like this one in Hersh’s article: “Richard Armitage, the Deputy Secretary of State in Bush’s first term, told me, `I think Iran has a secret nuclear-weapons programme – I believe it, but I don’t know it.’” This brand of faith-based politics – believing without knowing – leads then to sheerest illogic, as for example in this: “The agency’s officials believe that Iran wants to be able to make a nuclear weapon, but `nobody has presented an inch of evidence of a parallel nuclear-weapons programme in Iran,’ the high-ranking diplomat told me. The IAEA’s best estimate is that the Iranians are five years away from building a nuclear bomb.”

In other words, you believe something for which there is no evidence, and based purely on your subjective belief, you offer a time-table: five years, and a bomb would somehow materialise! Without making public any evidence, Israeli intelligence service Mossad says that Iran will have the bomb in a year or so, and must therefore be bombed forthwith. Others are more laconic. “In August, *The Washington Post* reported that the most recent comprehensive National Intelligence Estimate predicted that Iran was a decade away from

being a nuclear power,” says Hersh, referring to the combined findings of all the U.S. intelligence services. And: “Robert Gallucci, a former government expert on non-proliferation who is now the dean of the School of Foreign Service at Georgetown, told me, ‘Based on what I know, Iran could be eight to ten years away’ from developing a deliverable nuclear weapon.”

As for the Iranian side of the story, President Ahmadinejad has said time and again that Iran has no nuclear weapons programme and he has been denouncing the very idea of weapons that exterminate masses of people, in line with a *fatwa* by the late Ayatollah Khomeini against the production of nuclear weapons, which has been repeated in a new *fatwa* by Ayatollah Khamenei, the current Chief Jurisprudent of Iran. I might add that in the mulla-infested Muslim society of India, *fatwas* are dime a dozen and none has any but purely nuisance value; in Iran, by contrast, a *fatwa* by the Chief Jurisprudent has immense significance, far beyond governmental law or practice, which is constitutionally required to follow the *fatwa*. Since everyone else is making guesses, I might volunteer my own guess: Iran wants to have the capacity to make nuclear weapons, because its enemies have them, but is enjoined by its highest authorities not to actually produce any – a policy rather similar to what Jawaharlal Nehru and Homi Jehangir Bhabha set up for India in days of yore.

NO restraint on U.S.

The Bush administration has a simple story to tell for public consumption: President Ahmadinejad is Adolf Hitler (the same was said about Saddam Hussein); he is hell-bent on producing nuclear weapons; if he gets them, he will start Third World War and pass on the technology to the world’s top terrorists; we have to stop all this, even if it takes the use of nuclear bombs (the “civilian-friendly nukes”). If you are an American and believe your President, you will give Bush the power he wants. In a recent poll, 48 per cent of Americans supported the idea that the U.S. should attack Iran. They were not asked whether nuclear weapons should be used.

But the key question is this: what is the current and historically novel geopolitical conjuncture, and what are the new terms of American power and policy, which make it possible to think and actually plan to use nuclear weapons of any kind in the near future? Here I shall first take recourse to an article which was published roughly at the same time as that of Seymour Hersh, in an equally if not more prestigious journal, *Foreign Affairs*, but written by much less known authors. I refer to “The Rise of U.S. Nuclear Primacy” by Keir A. Lieber and Daryl G. Press, published in that magazine’s issue of March/April 2006. The main burden of that argument is that the era of “Balance of Terror” is over and the era of absolute nuclear superiority of the U.S. has begun, thanks to the dismemberment of the Soviet Union, dispersal of its arsenal, the degradation of what Russia still has, its inability to keep pace with the immense strides the U.S. has made in the nuclear weapons field, and what these authors call the “glacial pace of modernisation of China’s nuclear forces”. The upshot is that: “It will probably soon be possible for the United States to destroy the long-range nuclear arsenals of Russia or China with a first strike.”

VAHID SALEMI/AP



Former President Akbar Hashemi Rafsanjani.

This, they rightly claim, is a situation unprecedented since the very early 1950s, when the U.S. did have such superiority and forced the Soviet Union to accept a division of Europe on its own terms, telling the Soviet Union that, otherwise, “the United States intended to win World War III by immediately launching a massive nuclear strike on the Soviet Union, its Eastern European clients, and its Chinese ally. These plans were not the concoctions of mid-level Pentagon bureaucrats; they were approved by the highest level of the U.S. government.” Subsequently, the Soviet breakthrough in the thermonuclear field and rapid assembly of a nuclear arsenal qualitatively equal to that of the U.S. led to a situation where neither could destroy the other’s arsenal with a first strike, so that any move to use nuclear bombs at all was seen to assure comprehensive mutual destruction. The two superpowers were restrained from attacking with nuclear power not only each other but also each other’s allies. At the dawn of the 21st century that restraint is no long there, and the sole nuclear superpower, armed with a nuclear arsenal far more lethal and elaborate than any in the past is free to use it as it sees fit.

The historical record bears this out. The Cuban missile crisis is very well-known because it was highly publicised and because the Soviet Union was the one that was stared down. Less well-known is that toward the very end of the Vietnam War, Henry Kissinger was hell-bent on using the so-called “tactical” nuclear weapons and severe Soviet warnings of retaliation were required to have him and his ilk to abandon those plans. Not only that. The U.S. threatened to use nuclear weapons in West Asia and the surrounding region, against Gamal Abdel Nasser and others, time and again, well over a dozen times, and only the fear of Soviet retaliation, in a place of Soviet choosing, warded off those threats. No such situation obtains today. Iran may, as it does, dismiss the nuclear threats of today as “psychological warfare” but in the event that the U.S. does decide to go nuclear, there is no power to stop it.

This radical shift in the objective situation has come together with a sea-change in the U.S. doctrines of warfare, including nuclear warfare. Immediately after the collapse of the Soviet Union, Dick Cheney, as a key member of the Reagan administration, began supervising the evolution of a doctrine that called for research concentration and development effort for production of “usable” nuclear weapons, and for a military strategy based on “a mix of strike capabilities” in which nuclear weapons would be used together with conventional ones. The 2001 Nuclear Posture Review was already envisaging such a “mix” in certain hypothetical scenarios in West Asia as acts of “self-defence” threatening U.S. forces and/or strategic interests in the region. By 2002, the Bush administration had propounded its doctrine of what it called “pre-emption”, which asserted the U.S. right to attack any country, at any scale, based upon perception of future threat. As Noam Chomsky was quick to point out, this departed from all known concepts of pre-emption, which presume a demonstrable threat of imminent attack by a known adversary. What the U.S. was in fact asserting was the right of “anticipatory action” where it would unilaterally attack anyone whom it suspects of posing a threat at any point in the future. Iraq was attacked because it was “suspected” of developing weapons of mass destruction and “suspected” of having links with Osama bin Laden; since the U.S. was the one doing the “suspecting”, no further proof was really required.

This doctrine of “anticipatory action” was speedily extended to the nuclear field, and the Doctrine for Joint Nuclear Operations of 2005 was calling for “integrating conventional and nuclear attacks” under an “integrated” command, while “geographic combatant commanders” were made “responsible for defining theatre objectives and developing

nuclear plans". In other words, the regional commanders executing the war against Iran and having jurisdiction for that region would be in charge of an "integrated" command for a non-nuclear as well as nuclear weapons, and they could develop plans that would be submitted to the President for his formal approval. The arsenal of "strategic" nuclear weapons is still under much stricter rules, but command over "tactical" weapons has been relaxed and dispersed in accordance with a new classification which claims that these "mini-nukes" are "safe for the surrounding population". That re-classification is frightening enough. Moreover, this dispersal of authority among regional commanders itself makes it all the more likely that, in the heat of battle and faced with particularly difficult targets, the man in the field would opt for the nuclear weapon and, since he is the man in the know, the war-loving President would grant the permission. It is in this minefield of doctrinal revision and unfettered global ambition that, according to Philip Giraldi, Cheney ordered a "contingency plan" which "includes large-scale air assault on Iran employing both conventional and tactical nuclear weapons".

Not only does the U.S. openly plan for nuclear attack on any number of non-nuclear countries, it is also the chief proliferator of nuclear weapons in the world. Its extensive nuclear cooperation with Israel is well-known but it has also supplied nuclear weapons to some non-nuclear members of North Atlantic Treaty Organisation (NATO), chiefly Germany but also Belgium, Italy, the Netherlands and Turkey. There is hardly any significant NATO country which does not have nuclear weapons on its soil and the possible use of them is now part of NATO's strike plans. Thus, the general threshold regarding the use of nuclear weapons is getting lower in Europe as well. Hence the French President Jacques Chirac's recent threat that he would use nuclear weapons against terrorist threats and countries known to be developing WMDs.

This imperial nuclear order - the declared intent of the U.S. to use nuclear weapons as part of an "integrated toolbox" of weapons; great proliferation of such weapons throughout NATO; the increased willingness of Europe to go the U.S. way in matters nuclear; the degraded state of the Russian arsenal and the practical irrelevance of the Chinese one - leaves countries such as Iran an easy prey for predators. Maybe it will happen, maybe not. Only Bush, Cheney & company would know for sure.

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