

US Policy to Combat WMD:

From Conventional Response to Nuclear Strikes?

Some of the material that I am going to work through may seem a little arcane, and the detail of the changes that are occurring in US security strategy are somewhat difficult to grasp - sometimes even for those working in the field. However, as will become clear during the course of my presentation, it is hard to understate their importance. In particular, the principle that nuclear weapons exist to deter the use of other nuclear weapons no longer holds true in US doctrine, and the pre-emptive or preventive use of nuclear weapons against any nuclear, biological or chemical or NBC weapons can no longer be excluded.

US concerns about the proliferation of NBC weapons in the post-Cold War began almost as the Berlin Wall fell, but were heightened considerably in the wake of the 1991 Gulf War. We began to hear that the world was now more dangerous, and that threats come from many directions and forms and not just from the Soviet Union. Proliferation was for the first time identified as a military threat and not just as a political and diplomatic problem. Threats to Europe and the US were said to be unpredictable, and the world of the post-Cold war to be more dangerous than the past. During the 1990s fears of NBC-armed terrorists were added to previous concerns about so-called 'rogue states'.

My focus in this presentation is on the active offensive and defensive measures that form the bulk of President Bush's strategy to prevent and defend against proliferation under the name Counterproliferation. The President's National Strategy to Combat Weapons of Mass Destruction says:

We will ensure that all needed capabilities to combat [weapons of mass destruction] WMD are fully integrated into the emerging defense transformation plan and into our homeland security posture. Counterproliferation will also be fully integrated into the basic doctrine, training, and equipping of all forces, in order to ensure that they can sustain operations to decisively defeat WMD-armed adversaries.

In other words, Counterproliferation is now the central policy for combating proliferation, while non-proliferation diplomacy takes a back seat. This mission is at the core of the defense posture of the United States, not as in the past an additional mission or last resort in the event of a failure of traditional non-proliferation regimes. It is therefore important to understand the nature of Counterproliferation policy and the effect it has had in the past ten years on US military doctrines, and in particular on nuclear use doctrine.

I would say at this point that the choice by the Department of Defense of the term WMD is deliberate. It allows the administration to equate even the possible possession of chemical or biological weapons by terrorists with the need to retain nuclear weapons in the US arsenal. I generally prefer to say NBC weapons, using the NATO terminology to differentiate these very different classes of weapons, but in this presentation there will be some mixing as I quote US government documents.

What is Counterproliferation?

Counterproliferation is not a new concept. Indeed, while the word did not exist until the 1990s, the concept emerged in US doctrine before the birth of the nuclear age. General Groves, the head of the Manhattan project, was charged with ensuring that neither Germany nor Japan was able to acquire the bomb and to direct military operations to that end. Raids were conducted on, amongst others, Japanese research laboratories in Tokyo and, as shown in the Kirk Douglas film, the Heroes of Telemark, on a Norwegian heavy water plant. As Professor Sir Joseph Rotblat points out, Groves believed that the US should use

nuclear weapons to preserve the US nuclear monopoly. In a more recent example, Israel's destruction of the Osiraq reactor, integral to the Iraqi bomb program, was a counterproliferation mission. But the name and policy are American creations.

The Defense Counterproliferation Initiative was launched by then Defense Secretary Les Aspin in 1993. According to the Air War College, the definition of Counterproliferation under the Clinton administration can be summarized as:

the military component of non-proliferation, in the same way that military strategy is a component of foreign policy. Counterproliferation refers specifically to the Department of Defense activities, both in the actual employment of military force to protect US forces, and in their support of overall US nonproliferation policies and goals.

This Clinton-era definition is now only partially accurate, as Counterproliferation has now supplanted non-proliferation as the principle means by which the United States seeks to control the spread and use of NBC weapons.

The Bush administration has taken these concerns and their response to them to completely new levels, and has now set out US policy for combating the proliferation of NBC weapons in the National Strategy to Combat Weapons of Mass Destruction published in late 2002.

That there is possession of nuclear, biological and chemical weapons, and a threat of their use by terrorists is a base assumption of the Bush administration. The National Strategy states that:

WMD - nuclear, biological and chemical - in the possession of hostile states and terrorists represent one of the greatest challenges facing the United States ... An effective strategy for countering WMD, including their use and further proliferation, is an integral component of the United States of America.

Part of the National Strategy advocates multilateral non-proliferation diplomacy - although that section is incredibly thin. Since the US has abandoned the Anti-Ballistic Missile Treaty to build missile defenses; ended the START process in favour of the meaningless SORT or Moscow Treaty; has reneged on the NPT Review Conference commitments of 2000, and is preparing to return to nuclear testing anything they say on arms control, disarmament and non-proliferation cannot be trusted. The only concrete measure in the National Strategy section on non-proliferation is a Fissile Material Cut-Off Treaty (FMCT). But even that is advanced in a form that the US knows is unacceptable to China, India and Pakistan (and possibly Israel) and will therefore be dead on arrival in the Conference on Disarmament.

Another section concerns Cooperative Threat Reduction, the cooperation between the US and Russia, funded by the US, to ensure the safety and security of fissile material, nuclear and chemical weapons - as well as some dismantlement of the old Soviet arsenals. However, any administration statements on this question are suspect as they consistently underfund and disregard these programs - and indeed came to office actively hostile to them. Even the new budget proposed by President Bush would force cuts in CTR programs.

But these non-proliferation diplomacy initiatives are incidental to Bush policy. The Center for Contemporary Conflict of the Naval Postgraduate School says of the new strategy that:

The new US deterrence posture against WMD use still rests on a strong declaratory policy and effective military forces, but there has been a not-so-subtle shift in the balance of deterrence from long-standing promises to punish any adversary that contemplated WMD use against US interests, to increasingly credible threats to deny adversaries any meaningful political or military advantage from using WMD.

So deterrence is now inherently preventive and pre-emptive. The US will strike first and strike hard to prevent an enemy using NBC weapons. The CCC also says that the weaving together of previously separate DOD and State Department policies at the Presidential level shows a never-before seen level of political commitment from a President to pursue proliferators and end proliferation. Other analysts might argue, and I do, that it actually shows a never before seen commitment to strengthening US military advantages over the rest of the world. The US has no interest in pursuing its disarmament commitment under Article VI of the NPT, nor in the disarmament of those countries (including Russia) from which it sees no threat. Rather the National Strategy seeks to end NBC threats to the US, a much less comprehensive aim.

How is US Counterproliferation policy run?

Counterproliferation is run under the auspices of Department of Defense (DOD), with the projects being coordinated by the Defense Threat Reduction Agency (DTRA).

The mission assigned to DOD is to interdict the spread and use of NBC weapons if possible. If this is not possible then their possessors are to be deterred. And if deterrence fails, or is thought likely to fail then to defend against NBC use. Doctrine for Counterproliferation missions was due to be finalized in Joint Publication 3-40 in November 2002, although that paper remains classified.

One other aspect of deterrence is said to be that, if it becomes necessary to strike against an NBC-armed adversary then this should be done in such a way as to deter any other future adversary from even seeking NBC weapons.

To carry out this mission Counterproliferation comprises active and passive defenses, and offensive capability, both conventional and nuclear.

Passive Defenses

Under this heading comes items such as using radiation detectors in ports to scrutinize containers entering the country. Other items would include detectors for chemical or biological weapons. Such sensors are already deployed in Washington DC. It also includes ensuring that troops are ready to operate in an NBC environment, with proper training and equipment. The full resources of the NEST teams, the FBI and other federal agencies are also allocated to this passive defense under the auspices of the new Homeland Security Department. DTRA supervises the development of new technologies to assist in these tasks under CP Capstone Requirements.

Active Defenses

This is largely taken to mean missile defenses. Integrated from Patriot missile batteries, through theater missile defenses, to the mid-course and terminal phase interceptors of the President's grandiose vision - missile defenses are an integral part of the war on terror - at least WMD terror. Their purpose is to give field commanders, and the President as Commander-in Chief, the necessary confidence to use all military means available to the US - including the use of nuclear weapons - without being at risk of attack from NBC weapons. That, at least is the theory in US defense planning, and while I personally am extremely sceptical about this I think that a debate on the efficacy of missile defense, while important, is beyond the scope of this school.

Offensive Options

The US President has at his disposal a variety of tools to conduct offensive operations against those who would seek to use NBC weapons against the United States. These tools are the same for use against states, and against non-state groups and some of them are likely to prove blunt instruments against terrorists, others may be more successful. On the domestic front, these offensive options include the integration of military forces and law enforcement officials as necessary. Abroad, the military takes the lead.

Using Special Forces

Counterproliferation is a new mission for US special forces. They now are equipped and trained to seek out NBC weapons, to seize facilities and the weapons themselves, capturing the terrorists possessing them if possible, but killing them if necessary. Search and destroy missions along these lines have been carried out, with notable lack of success in actually finding any NBC weapon facilities, in Afghanistan in the wake of the fall of the Taliban. There has been relatively little focus so far on this aspect of Counterproliferation, and the dangers of failure of a special forces attack makes this an unlikely choice except in unusual circumstances.

Using Conventional Air or Missile Strikes

The full might of the conventional capability of the US armed forces can be brought to bear against potential NBC-armed terrorists. The attack with cruise missiles against the Al-Shifa pharmaceutical in 1998 was an example of a conventional counterproliferation mission. The CIA suspected the plant of producing chemical weapons, having sampled possible CW precursors outside the plant. The owner of the plant was suspected of links with Al-Qaida. Unfortunately these links proved to be non-existent and the plant proved to be a civilian human and veterinary pharmaceutical factory. This highlights the need for superb intelligence when planning a counterproliferation mission, and the risks and costs of failure.

A new generation of weapons developed under the auspices of DTRA for CP missions have been tested against cave structures in Afghanistan. These are a new generation of fuel air explosives known as Thermobaric weapons. These are solid fuel weapons that explode, producing an intense blast overpressure which can in some circumstances equal and even exceed that of a nuclear weapon. They next produce, as a result of the explosion of the fuel, an intense fireball which can rival the fireball of a nuclear explosion in temperature. This in turn produces a vacuum and then a new blast wave as the vacuum fills with air. Special effects thermobaric weapons can be produced, for example by adding aluminium tailings to the fuel in order to intensify the heat and burn length of the fireball. When penetration aids and special fuzes are added, these weapons become especially suitable for bunker busting against NBC weapon facilities.

Using Nuclear Forces

This is where we come to an area of serious controversy. US nuclear doctrine has been altered by the requirements of counterproliferation during the 1990s. By 1996, Tactical Nuclear Doctrine had been changed to allow for the use of nuclear weapons against terrorists:

Enemy combat forces and facilities that may be likely targets for nuclear strikes are

- Nonstate actors (facilities and operation centers) that possess WMD;

This policy was due to be updated during the course of 2002, but it is unlikely that the new Doctrine will appear on the web as the 1996 version did. But this is a key point. Non-State actors are a legitimate target for US nuclear weapons. Under the adaptive planning process, generic plans for strikes against terrorist facilities are drawn up. When a real target presents itself these plans can be modified to fit the real-life scenario in a very short period of time, less than 24 hours.

When might nuclear weapons be used in such circumstances? According to the US military, nuclear weapons are necessary for the destruction of special classes of targets that cannot be sufficiently held at risk by conventional weapons. These special classes of target include:

* Hard and Deeply Buried Targets

* Chemical and Biological Agents

The US already deploys one weapon, the B61-11 free fall bomb, with limited capability to penetrate a hardened target. This has been deployed in Europe and the US since the early 1990s and is available for counter-terrorist, counterproliferation missions.

The requirements to be able to destroy bunkers, and to burn chemical or biological weapons are driving the Advanced Concepts Initiative in US weapons labs, a program to develop so-called 'tailored effects nuclear weapons' to attack specific targets. These would include a high-radiation, low-blast weapon to destroy biological agents without spreading them into the atmosphere; or a high-blast, low-radiation weapon to destroy or at least disable a bunker without creating too much collateral damage.

There is a real risk of negative consequences flowing from this policy, including:

Lowering the bar for the use of nuclear weapons, maybe leading the US to use nuclear weapons ahead of terrorist use;

Undermining non-proliferation and disarmament treaties, both because this policy implies the US will never disarm while it is possible that terrorists may hold NBC weapons, and because this next generation of weapons will have to be tested.

Undermining the NPT through the end of Negative Security Assurances, under which the US and other states have promised never to use nuclear weapons against non-nuclear weapon states.

Refusing to undertake negotiations for effective, enforceable arms control, disarmament and non-proliferation agreements to reduce the threat, for example, the destruction by the US of the BWC enforcement protocol negotiations.

At this point I would note quickly that while this is a US-driven policy, NATO allies have begun to acquiesce in a shift in NATO nuclear doctrine to accommodate US procedures. The adoption of a revised Strategic Concept in the NATO paper MC400/2 last year allowed for the use of nuclear weapons in Counterproliferation missions. And at the Summit in Prague in November, NATO adopted anti-terrorism as a core mission. This is not just a rhetorical change. Already it seems that US nuclear weapons in Europe are being moved from the UK and Germany where they have been mostly consolidated after the old War, to the south - specifically Greece, Turkey and Italy where they are closer to potential theaters of operation. Those NATO nations that participate in nuclear sharing, training their air forces for the use of nuclear weapons although they are nominally non-nuclear countries are even more deeply implicated in this policy.

Conclusion

Through the elevation of Counterproliferation to the centre of defense policy and doctrine, the current US administration has created the potential for a terrible negative cycle of proliferation, and response to proliferation.

Asserting that treaties don't work, and bringing to the fore a military policy to prevent proliferation by force has the effect of undermining treaties, and making the first assertion a self-fulfilling prophecy.

It is entirely sensible to seek to prevent the use of nuclear weapons by terrorists, and to destroy them if they pose a real threat. As such, Clinton-era counterproliferation was a logical policy development - although the willingness of that administration to consider nuclear weapons under that heading was reprehensible.

However, the right of self-defence is not unlimited. Using nuclear weapons against the territory of a state hosting terrorists, willingly or unwillingly, is never acceptable. The human and environmental effects of these weapons are simply too great to contemplate their use. For example, one study has estimated that an attempt to destroy Saddam Hussein's main palace complex in Baghdad with even one nuclear weapon would immediately kill 20,000 people, with many, many thousands more who would die from burns, radiation poisoning and other injuries that would go untreated as a result of the destruction of medical facilities in the area.

As I said at the beginning these issues can seem somewhat arcane. They are, however, extremely important and as researchers, academics and NGOs and citizens, we have a responsibility to ensure that there is full public debate at national and international levels. Those of us who work in the US and Europe bear a special responsibility as it is in our name that counterproliferation and nuclear use to combat WMD terrorism is being pursued.

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In US doctrine, counterproliferation may be viewed as the military component of non-proliferation, in the same way that military strategy is a component of foreign policy. Counterproliferation refers specifically to the Department of Defense activities, both in the actual employment of military force to protect US forces, and in their support of overall US nonproliferation policies and goals.

What's New in the New US Strategy to Combat WMD?

The new US deterrence posture against WMD use still rests on a strong declaratory policy and effective military forces, but there has been a not-so-subtle shift in the in the balance of deterrence from long-standing promises to punish any adversary that contemplated WMD use against US interests, to increasingly credible threats to deny adversaries any meaningful political or military advantage from using WMD.

1996 Doctrine for Tactical Nuclear Operations

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Abstract

Fighting WMD Terrorism: From Conventional Response to Nuclear Strikes?

The talk will examine the range of US policy for military action against terrorist armed with WMD, from special forces action to conventional air strikes. It will then examine the development of nuclear policy and doctrine during the 1990s and under the Bush administration for the possible use of nuclear weapons against non-state groups. Finally, I will discuss the likelihood of nuclear use against terrorists as counterproliferation becomes central to use military doctrine, and entwined with counterterrorism.