United States: the Strangelove doctrine

Mention nuclear proliferation and people think of North Korea or Iran: But what about the United States? The Bush administration plans to use nuclear weapons even against countries without them. It also intends to enrich its massive arsenal with new high-precision bombs.

By Pascal Boniface

The United States Strategic Command, which is in charge of the US nuclear arsenal, held a high-security meeting at a base in Nebraska in August to plan for the purchase of a new generation of nuclear weapons. More than 150 high-level specialists took part, among them members of the US administration, directors of the three main US nuclear laboratories (Los Alamos, Sandia and Lawrence Livermore), high-ranking Air Force and Strategic Command officers, industrialists and business specialists. However, Congressional observers were kept out[1].

The aim of this exclusive brainstorming was to diversify the nuclear options available to US planners. The idea is to stock up on high-precision but low-intensity weapons, capable of penetrating deep underground to destroy bunkers and shelters. The Pentagon no longer limits itself to listing the missiles and bombers possessed by foreign countries that pose a threat to US security. It has gone so far as to draw up a list of 70 countries equipped with a total of more than 1,400 missile command posts or underground weapons of mass destruction installations[2]. Those it considers dictators, hidden away in their bunkers, have given US defence chiefs a cold sweat. The crux of the problem is the reduction of the collateral damage that attacks on such sites might cause.

So the US army is looking for a new kind of weapon that will "contribute to our ability to prevent attacks by deterring them", as Keith Payne puts it. He was Deputy Assistant Secretary of Defence until May 2003; then he joined a thinktank, the National Institute for Public Policy. He believes that weapons of this kind could deter potential enemies from building underground installations but says: "It's not worth the investment"[3].

This would be the first time the expansion of one country's arsenal stalled the military efforts of its official enemies. We know from strategic history that this hasn't happened before. When one country accelerates its weapons programmes, especially if, like the US, it is seen as being aggressive against the weak, its potential adversaries necessarily make efforts to catch up or find a way around the threat.

Other US defence chiefs share Payne's opinions. Pentagon spokesman Michael Shavers suggests that the US deal with emerging threats. Paul Robinson, director of the Sandia laboratory, says the US would have more chance of deterring attacks from adversaries if the distinction between nuclear and conventional weapons became more blurred. He says the US should consider "combinations of conventional and/or nuclear attacks for pre-emption or retaliation"[4].

We are a long way from President George Bush's statement—that the US needed unilaterally to reduce its nuclear arsenal—on 23 May 2000 during his election campaign, when he said "these unneeded weapons are the expensive relics of dead conflicts"[5]. Partisans of weapons control, who have fallen from favour in Washington, have good reason to be worried, while US nuclear laboratories, which not long ago feared they would have to cut back programmes, anti cipate good times. This nuclear strategy is not

[1]Julian Borger, "Dr Strangeloves meet to plan a new era", *The Guardian*, London, 7 August 2003.

[2]William J Broad, "US presses program for new atom bombs", *International Herald Tribune*, Paris, 4 August 2003.

[3]*International Herald Tribune*, 4 August 2003.

[4]*The Guardian*, 7 August 2003.

[5]Speech to the National Press Club.

surprising. It follows from developments already under way. As early as September 1996 Bill Clinton signed a presidential directive revoking the commitment made in 1978 not to use nuclear weapons against countries that did not possess any.

In January 2002 the Secretary of State for Defence, Donald Rumsfeld, submitted a nuclear posture review to Congress. The idea of strategically developing a renewal plan for the US arsenal was already central. The document said that the US now had to face a wider variety of dangers from different horizons, not always foreseeable. The Pentagon felt that that the existing arsenal did not include precise enough weapons: the arms the US possessed, though extremely powerful, were insufficiently capable of penetrating underground. Hence the need for new weapons to destroy deep-level bunkers while limiting collateral damage. The report cited 1,400 subterranean targets. Conventional weapons were felt to have insufficient penetration to destroy these. To guarantee the longevity of long-range weapons as well as producing new nuclear warheads, it might be necessary to resume nuclear testing.

Stripped of their Soviet adversary, Pentagon chiefs were desperately looking for a replacement enemy to justify the continuation of their programmes. The review listed seven countries against which new-generation tactical nuclear weapons could be used: Russia, China, Iraq, Iran, North Korea, Libya and Syria[6].

The conclusion of Jonathan Schell, a leading disarmament lawyer[6], was that "the new Bush policy clearly announces that the true prevention of proliferation is not to be any treaty but American attack"[7]. This strategy is deeply worrying. It is a radical switch from the classic theory of deterrent towards a strategy of nuclear weapons use, based on rapidity and surprise. It will be a further challenge to the already ailing disarmament process. And it effectively promotes nuclear proliferation. The temptation to see nuclear weapons as being like any other, and therefore to use them, is not new. From the start, there were two rival views. Those who favoured the political approach insisted on the radical difference between conventional and nuclear weapons, which would supposedly frighten the adversary so much that they would never have to be used. Others presented nuclear weapons as military tools more effective than others, and did not rule out using them.

During the 1950s President Dwight Eisenhower's team counted on the US nuclear capacity to compensate for the Soviets' larger conventional arsenal. Nuclear weapons were supposed to give you "a bigger bang for less bucks"[8]. The graduated response strategy adopted in the 1960s followed the same line: it made explicit plans for the use of tactical nuclear weapons on the battlefield. The same was true of the neutron bomb project (ultimately abandoned) in the 1980s. US strategic thought has always mixed political and military approaches to nuclear weapons. But never, until now, has the US proposed to pull the nuclear trigger not just first, but without prior provocation.

What is a deterrent? An explicit threat to use nuclear weapons that would cause irreversible damage, to deter a potential adversary from resorting to any military attack, including one by conventional weapons. Seeming prepared to be the first to use nuclear weapons is essential to any credible deterrent. That is why supporters of the deterrent strategy reject the no first use position, which makes nuclear weapons a deterrent only to other nuclear weapons. The US and France both considered their deterrent good even against a conventional attack by the Soviets.

But it was different when it came to non-nuclear states. From 1978 the US was committed not to use nuclear weapons against countries that did not have any. The five official nuclear powers[9] solemnly confirmed this commitment in 1994, when they

[6]Barthélemy Courmont, "Une nouvelle doctrine nucléaire américaine?", *Défense nationale*, Paris, July 2001.
[6]Author of the disturbing 1982 classic *The Fate of the Earth*, reprinted by Stanford University Press, 2000.
[7]"Disarmament wars", *The Nation*, New York, 25 February 2002.(Subscribers only)
[8]See Lawrence Freedman, *The Evolution of Nuclear Strategy*, Macmillan, London, 1987.
[9]United States, Russia, France, Great Britain, China.

extended the Non-Proliferation Treaty (NPT), 26 years after its original signing. This was a concession to non-nuclear states in exchange for renouncing all nuclear weapons programmes. The US is implicitly reneging on this commitment.

Even more alarmingly this new strategic doctrine provides for the US to use nuclear weapons not only against a country with no nuclear capacity, but against one that has not attacked the US at all. To do this, the US would merely have to declare a preventive action, outside the legal parameters of self-defence, against a country it claimed to suspect of wanting to interfere with US security. Those in favour of the change in doctrine say that the war in Iraq would have been faster and smoother if the US could have killed Saddam Hussein in his bunker at the start of the conflict, using high-precision nuclear weapons. They had already put forward this argument after the first Gulf war in 1990-91[10]. By openly breaking the taboo that separated nuclear weapons (which have not been used since 1945 because of their apocalyptic nature) from conventional ones, these Doctor Strangeloves risk facilitating their use. Do they hope to resolve the complex situation in the Middle East with mini-bombs? You don't have to be a strategy specialist to balk at that. Not to mention the risk of targeting errors.

On 6 August 2003, commemorating the 58th anniversary of the bombing of Hiroshima, the city's mayor, Tadatoshi Akiba, declared that the NPT was about to collapse, not because of North Korea's aggressive stance, but because of the US nuclear policy[11]. Washington's plans would mean the end of a 10-year ban on development of weapons of less than five kilotonnes. It appears that the US dream is a policy of pre-emptive nuclear strikes, the atomic equivalent of the pre-emptive self-defence seen in the war on Iraq.

Will the development of the new generation of weapons means the end of the moratorium on nuclear testing that the US announced in 1992? For the moment it is out of the question. Though Washington did not ratify the Comprehensive Nuclear Test Ban Treaty concluded in 1995, it did make a unilateral commitment to respect it.

In May 2002 the US promised Russia that it would reduce the number of active nuclear warheads in its possession from 6,000 to about 2,000. This was a sham promise: the US military retained the right to keep 10,000 warheads in stock, which could be reactivated in a matter of days if needed[12]. For an inventor of arms control, Washington is remarkably stubborn in its rejection of any kind of negotiated disarmament.

Arms control was the result of the strategically destabilising and financially ruinous effects of the arms race in the 1960s and 1970s. The idea was not to stop the race, but to control it bilaterally. The arsenals of the two superpowers continued to expand until the end of the 1980s, but at a much lower rate. At the start of the 1990s arms control became disarmament: commitments were made for the removal of intermediate-range nuclear forces, reductions in the main arsenals (SALT had given way to START, with reduction replacing limitation[13]), a total ban on chemical weapons and a reduction of conventional forces in Europe.

This momentum was lost in the second half of the 1990s, with the rejection of the Comprehensive Nuclear Test Ban Treaty, the repeal of the 1972 Anti-Ballistic Missile Treaty (after it had survived all the vicissitudes of East-West confrontation), and the rejection of the treaty banning mines and the compliance protocol for the biological and toxin weapons convention. The extremely unilateral US is trying to retreat from its existing commitments (to which other countries are expected to adhere) and refusing to sign up to any new ones (which other countries are expected to honour). This is

[10]See Boniface, *Contre le révisionnisme nucléaire*, Ellipses, Paris, 1994.

[11]"Is Bush readying a first strike strategy?", *International Herald Tribune*, 18 August 2003.

[12]Georges Le Guelte, "Une nouvelle posture américaine: révolution dans les concepts stratégiques?", *Revue internationale et stratégique*, Paris, n°47, Autumn 2002.

[13]The SALT agreements signed by the US and the USSR in 1972 and 1979 authorised further development, but with limits. The START agreements, 1991 and 1993, imposed a real reduction in the arsenals of both countries, from 13,000 to 6,000 warheads.

disarmament no longer negotiated, but imposed upon the weak as though they were the defeated party in a conflict.

The US, like the rest of the international community, has always turned a blind eye to Israel's nuclear programme, which is not a potential capacity but a present threat. After pressuring India and Pakistan not to develop nuclear weapons, and increasing pressure after their tests in 1998, the US has now accepted de facto their status as nuclear powers. We should note that all three countries stayed out of the NPT and are not in breach of any legal obligations.

The US plans, far from finishing proliferation, risk restarting it. Potential nuclear states can conclude from the new strategy, and from the Iraq war, that it is better to have a capacity to respond harmfully to attack than to adhere to commitments outlawing WMD, if you want to stay out of the firing line of the US. North Korea, which officially admits to having nuclear weapons and refuses any kind of international control, is being treated diplomatically by the US. But we know what happened to Iraq, which denied having nuclear weapons and accepted unlimited verification of its statements. The seventh review conference of the NPT, scheduled for 2005, could be stormier than usual.

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