The Core of the Matter: US Doctrine on Nuclear Weapons Use, 1988-2008

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The administration of George W. Bush is accused of adopting a new nuclear doctrine that includes the possibility of using nuclear weapons against threats that are non-nuclear in nature, for example, to deter use of chemical and biological weapons, and even as an alternative to conventional weapons in attacking well fortified targets. In practice, such ideas were already formulated and established during the administrations of the elder Bush and Clinton. Lately the argument over the nuclear doctrine has spilled over to the current presidential campaign and has caused an uproar in Washington. Yet despite the criticism, it seems that no one – neither the Republican nor the Democratic candidates – has any actual intention of changing the nuclear doctrine once voted into the White House.

Ever since the end of the Cold War and the disintegration of the USSR, there has been a heated debate in the United States about nuclear weapons use doctrine. Over the years, the primary purpose of the American nuclear arsenal was to deter the USSR from invading Western Europe, and to deter the USSR and China from using their nuclear weapons against the US and its allies. In its various phases, American nuclear strategy involved the possibility of using nuclear weapons not necessarily only as retaliation for use by others, and the United States refused to commit itself to a "no first use" policy. Nonetheless, in practice most of the nuclear warfare programs in the US, which affected the buildup of nuclear capability, focused on deterrence of nuclear threats.

Today the use of nuclear weapons or the threat to do so is raised also in relation to two central purposes that differ from deterrence of the nuclear threat. Indeed, over the last few years there has been a tendency to accuse George W. Bush of having lowered the nuclear threshold. The claim is that Bush has integrated the possibility of nuclear weapons use into warfare plans against non-nuclear threats, as a deterrent against chemical and biological threats, and especially to attack well-fortified targets that conventional weapons cannot destroy – the HDBTs (Hard and Deeply Buried Targets), such as control centers and storage sites of non-conventional weapons. To this end, the ostensible advantage of nuclear weapons lies in their destructive rather than their deterrent capabilities. In

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particular, critics of the Bush administration stress that the president has not concealed his interest in developing new generations of nuclear weapons, with an emphasis on bombs with improved earth penetrating capabilities to destroy underground targets.[1]

However, a thorough examination of the American nuclear doctrine reveals that to a large extent, it has remained consistent since the 1990s. In fact, the formal institutionalization of the same elements of the doctrine G. W. Bush is accused of creating actually occurred during the Clinton administration.

Over the past few months, the issue of the doctrine on using nuclear weapons has arisen in the debates between the various candidates in the current presidential race. In light of the criticism leveled against the Bush administration and its nuclear doctrine, it was to be expected that the various candidates, Democrats especially, would be called on to change the current doctrine in one way or another. However, in practice, at least at this stage, most of the candidates express their support for the current doctrine. The candidates seem to be reserving their criticism on the nuclear question for issues such as a prospective new generation of nuclear weapons, the size of the nuclear arsenal, and American's non-proliferation policy.

The Bush Sr. Administration

In many respects, the turning point in American attitudes to expanding the function of nuclear weapons beyond deterrence of nuclear threats or preventing a conventional defeat is found in the 1991 Gulf War and the administration of George Herbert Walker Bush.

As part of the efforts to deter Iraq from using its chemical and biological weapons against coalition troops and US allies, the administration of the elder Bush adopted a doctrine that was termed "calculated ambiguity." The idea of hinting at the possibility that Iraqi use of non-conventional weapons could bring the United States to retaliate with nuclear weapons lay behind this doctrine.[2] In practice, the administration decided to reject the idea of nuclear retaliation even were Iraq to use chemical or biological weapons.[3] And, while Iraq did not use its non-conventional weapons, many believed – and still believe – that the implied threat of nuclear retaliation played a significant role in that decision. This strengthened the claim that nuclear weapons have an important function even against non-nuclear threats.

The United States National Security Strategy of August 1991 stated in relation to the deterrence function of nuclear weapons that the changes underway in Eastern Europe lessened the importance of these weapons in relation to known threats. Instead, the United States was to prepare for possible threats from nations or leaders who might think they have little to lose by using weapons of mass destruction.[4] The accepted definition of a weapon of mass destruction includes nuclear, biological, and chemical weapons.

While emphasizing the deterrence aspect of nuclear weapons with regard to non-nuclear threats, the Bush administration also started to place greater emphasis on the possibility of using nuclear weapons against well-fortified targets. During the Gulf War, all such ideas were rejected out of hand, but in June 1992 there came a change in the nuclear warfare plans of the United States. In the wake of directives by Richard Cheney, then secretary of defense and now vice president, the plan also – and for the first time –included the possibility of using nuclear weapons against Third World countries engaged in developing weapons of mass destruction.

The nuclear weapons were meant to serve as a means of attacking well fortified weapons arsenals and not only as a deterrent against possible use of a nuclear device.[5]

The Clinton Administration

If the administration of George Bush Sr. was the one to expand the functions and purposes of nuclear weapons, it was the Clinton administration that followed that was responsible for formally institutionalizing these changes.

From the outset, the Clinton administration sought to adhere to its predecessor's nuclear doctrine. Official documents from that time state that the primary function of nuclear weapons is to serve as a deterrent against weapons of mass destruction, particularly nuclear ones, and to serve as a buffer in case of a significant conventional threat.[6] At the same time, in February 1997 it became known that as part of the administration's efforts to convince the Senate to ratify the Chemical Weapons Convention (CWC), President Clinton agreed to establish formally that the United States would be prepared to respond with nuclear weapons in case chemical weapons were used against it.[7] Two months later, the CWC was ratified by the Senate, and in November of that year President Clinton signed the PDD-60, a directive dealing with the doctrine for nuclear weapons use. The contents of the document remain classified, but from details that appeared in the media it would seem that it stated explicitly that the United States is likely to use nuclear weapons even against non-nuclear threats.[8] According to some publications, the document also included a list of nations against which the United States must be prepared to use nuclear weapons in response to their use of weapons of mass destruction, even if non-nuclear. Among the countries mentioned were Iran, Iraq, Syria, and Libya.[9]

Like the previous administration, the Clinton administration also clarified that it was not rejecting outright the use of nuclear weapons as a means of attacking well-fortified targets, including sites suspected of storing non-conventional weapons. The most blatant reference, one that spurred widespread public debate, was a statement made in 1996 by the then-Secretary of Defense William Perry, according to which there is a possibility that the United States would use nuclear weapons against a Libyan facility suspected of being a chemical weapons factory.[10]

The Bush Jr. Administration

The question of nuclear doctrine did not earn significant mention during the 2000 election campaign. The G. W. Bush administration continued its predecessor's doctrine, and even sought to emphasize this continuity.[11] At the same time, to a certain extent an attempt was made to minimize the dominance of nuclear weapons as a deterrent against non-nuclear threats, in order to strengthen the claims on the need for a missile defense system. Thus, for example, during the Senate hearings for his confirmation as secretary of defense, Donald Rumsfeld said that it would be improper to base deterrence against weapons of mass destruction on a threat of massive retaliation unless it were necessary to combine nuclear and non-nuclear capabilities.[12]

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This approach by the administration was likewise expressed in the comprehensive Nuclear Posture Review of December 2001. This review repeated that the United States continues to view nuclear weapons as a de-

terrent against weapons of mass destruction, including chemical and biological weapons, but there is also a need to develop conventional attack capabilities along with defensive ones.[13]

While the administration of the younger Bush focused on the deterrent nature of nuclear weapons, the thrust of the criticism against him actually focused on the idea of using nuclear weapons to attack well-fortified targets. Thus, for example, the American media accused the administration of directing the Pentagon to prepare plans for using nuclear weapons against non-nuclear nations such as Iran and Iraq.[14] Instead of referring directly to this criticism, the administration chose to divert the discussion to the deterrence aspect, and repeated its threat to use nuclear weapons against weapons of mass destruction.[15] This lack of distinction between the deterrent function of nuclear weapons and the expansion of their role on the battlefield created some confusion regarding the nuclear doctrine, a situation that only grew worse as criticism mounted.

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In September 2002, the president signed directive NSPD-17 entitled "National Strategy to Combat Weapons of Mass Destruction." The non-classified part of the document stated inter alia that the United States would continue to reserve the right to respond decisively – which included use of all options at its disposal – should weapons of mass destruction be used against it, its troops, or its allies.[16] According to the media, the classified version of the document changed the phrase "including through resort to all of our options" to "including potentially nuclear weapons."[17] The administration refused to relate to the publication of the classified version, but stated, with a certain amount of justification, that there had been no change in doctrine.[18]

The publication of NSPD-17 aroused widespread criticism of the administration, both at home and abroad. This criticism primarily grew out of broader criticism regarding the Bush administration's behavior in the international arena, specifically regarding Iraq.[19] The National Security Strategy made public by the administration at the same time, which stressed notions such as preemption and unilateral action,[20] caused many to interpret the NSPD-17 as an attempt to ready the stage and public opinion for possible use of nuclear weapons against Iraq.

During the 2003 Iraq War, the Bush administration maintained opacity regarding the question of the possible response to Iraqi use of weapons of mass destruction. In tandem with the threat of destructive retaliation, the administration made sure to declare that it would exact a high personal toll of every Iraqi involved in operating weapons of mass destruction. By contrast, at that time it was impossible to find official reference to the possibility of using nuclear weapons against well-fortified targets in Iraq.

From 2003, the American media did not devote much coverage to the issue of nuclear weapons doctrine. However, lately there has been a resurgence of interest in the topic. Last July a short document signed by the secretary of state, the secretary of defense, and the secretary of energy was made public. It represents an introduction to a more comprehensive examination of the nuclear position overall. The document, entitled "National Security and Nuclear Weapons: Maintaining Deterrence in the 21st Century," states

that the United States must maintain credible nuclear capabilities to be able to deter and respond to the use of weapons of mass destruction against the United States and its allies.[21] This time too the term "weapons of mass destruction" was chosen in order to hint that the function of nuclear weapons is also to deter chemical and biological threats. This time, unlike previous instances, neither the American nor the international media dealt with the document in depth.

To date the main discourse over the nuclear policy of the Bush administration has centered on the question of developing new generations of nuclear weapons and the question of the size of the nuclear arsenal. The Bush administration sees renewing the nuclear arsenal as a vital factor in maintaining American deterrence capability. The administration stresses that its plan to produce a new generation of nuclear weapons does not include new operational capabilities such as penetrating bunkers, but rather combines greater credibility and safety from unauthorized use.[22] There is a clear attempt on the part of the administration to deflect criticism of the ostensible expansion of the doctrine of nuclear weapons use.

The 2008 Presidential Campaign

While the central issues of the 2008 presidential election campaign center on maintaining a presence in Iraq and economic and domestic topics, the doctrine of nuclear weapons use has somewhat surprisingly become a subject of argument among the candidates and raised repeatedly in the various presidential debates. The campaign has again brought the issue to the front pages, and it is earning much mention in the media. The emphasis here has been not on the use of nuclear weapons as a deterrent against non-nuclear threats, rather on the use of nuclear weapons against well-fortified targets.

The question of nuclear weapons use entered the presidential campaign during the June debate between the Republican candidates. Among the questions asked of the candidates was the following: in case they were elected, would they be willing to consider using nuclear weapons against Iran's nuclear installations? Then-candidate Rudy Giuliani responded that that such an attack could probably be managed using conventional weapons, but that as president it was impossible to rule out anything and that no option should be taken off the table.[23] Mitt Romney said that he too thought that all options should remain on the table.

In August, the issue of nuclear weapons doctrine spilled over to the Democratic Party race, though this time not in the context of Iran. In response to the question if nuclear weapons should be considered against terrorist targets in Afghanistan and Pakistan, Senator Barack Obama answered that that it would be a mistake to consider using nuclear weapons in any circumstance. He added that the nuclear option is not on the table.[24] Later, Obama noted that he did not know of a single military expert who recommends using nuclear weapons against terrorist targets.

These statements by Obama invited widespread criticism among the other Democratic candidates. Senator Hillary Clinton cautioned that presidents must be careful when they refer to circumstances in which nuclear weapons would or would not be used, and that since the Cold War American presidents had used nuclear deterrence in or-

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der to maintain peace.[25] Clinton's words contradicted what she herself had said in April 2006. At that time, when asked if the United States ought to consider using nuclear weapons against Iran's nuclear installations, she answered that while the United States must keep all options open, the nuclear option should not be on the table.[26] Clinton later tried to explain the contradiction by saying that in 2006 she was asked about specific circumstances for using nuclear weapons.[27]

Nothing New Under the Sun?

Thus since the early 1990s, there has not been an essential change in the nuclear doctrine of the United States. Despite the fact that during this period three different presidents from two political parties sat in the White House, the United States chose to maintain a doctrine that does not rule out nuclear weapons use even against non-nuclear threats. The United States still views nuclear weapons as a primary means of deterrence not only against nuclear weapons but also against chemical and biological ones. At the same time, the United States is not prepared to reject the possibility of nuclear weapons use not only for deterrence but also as a means of attacking well-fortified targets that conventional weapons cannot destroy successfully.

While relatively speaking there has been virtually no criticism of the primary function of nuclear weapons, i.e., deterrence against nuclear threats, over the years much criticism has been leveled at the two other functions of these weapons in the American nuclear doctrine. However, despite this criticism, three administrations chose to institutionalize these functions in the doctrine and often even repeated their support of the doctrine in public. In this vein, then, the criticism leveled against G. W. Bush for his drive to lower the nuclear threshold and his retention of the right to use nuclear weapons against non-nuclear threats should be seen in the main as an outgrowth of the more general criticism of the Bush administration and its foreign policy. In the context of dealing with the challenges of non-conventional weapons, the central criticism stems from the decision of this administration to go to war in Iraq; the announcement on withdrawing from the ABM convention, which limited the development and deployment of missile defense systems; the negotiations about nuclear cooperation with India, which is not a signatory to the Non-Proliferation Treaty; and other administration initiatives intended to augment and upgrade the nuclear arsenal. However, in practice, in everything having to do with basic principles of the doctrine of nuclear weapons use, it is difficult to point

to any essential change made during the administration of the younger Bush.[28]

To date, despite some fine differences between the candidates running for president, it seems that the accepted approach is that the United States should continue to adhere to its nuclear doctrine, including its more controversial aspects. Yet notwithstanding their support of his nuclear doctrine in practice, the Democratic candidates focus their criticism on Bush's notions of upgrading nuclear weapons systems in order to separate their positions from his. It would seem that electing a Democratic candidate as president will end these initiatives, unless they are rejected first by Congress.

At the same time, it is possible that since of late important American media publications have included a host of editorials calling on candidates to support a doctrine of "no first use" of nuclear weapons, this will bring about a change in the candidates' statements on the topic. At present, however, the likelihood of that is not high, and it will almost certainly remain that way at least until after the next comprehensive Nuclear Posture Review that is to take place, in response to pressure by Congress, by the end of 2009.[29]

Notes

1 Early in the G. W. Bush administration, the focus was on the possibility of developing a Robust Nuclear Earth Penetrator (RNEP) capable of destroying well-fortified underground targets that conventional weapons cannot successfully target. The administration abandoned the idea because of widespread political and public opposition. Today, the main thrust of the criticism focuses on the intention to undertake a comprehensive upgrading of existing warheads, an intention that in the meantime has been undermined by Congress. See "Robust Nuclear Earth Penetrator," April 9, 2006, http://www.globalsecurity.org/wmd/systems/rnep.htm; Jonathan Medalia, "The Reliable Replacement Warhead Program: Background and Current Developments," *Congressional Research Service*, July 26, 2007; Robert S. Norris and Hans M. Kristensen, "The U.S. Nuclear Stockpile, Today and Tomorrow," *Bulletin of the Atomic Scientists* 63, no. 5 (September-October 2007): 62.

2 James A. Baker, *The Politics of Diplomacy: Revolution, War and Peace 1989-1992* (New York: G. P. Putnam's Sons, 1995), p. 359.

3 George Bush and Brent Scowcroft, *A World Transformed* (New York: Vintage Books, 1998), p. 463.

4 The White House, *National Security Strategy of the United States*, August 1991.

5 Hans M. Kristensen, *Nuclear Futures: Proliferation of Weapons of Mass Destruction and US Nuclear Strategy*, British American Security Information Council, BASIC Research Report 98.2, March 1998, pp. 10-11.

6 Joint Chiefs of Staff, Joint Pub 3-12 - Doctrine for Joint Nuclear Operations, April 29, 1993.

7 Thomas W. Lippman, "Clinton Presses Chemical Pact; Promise of Fierce Response Offered to Gain GOP Support," *Washington Post*, February 15, 1997.

8 Jeffrey R. Smith, "Clinton Directive Changes Strategy on Nuclear Arms," *Washington Post*, December 7, 1997.

9 Kristensen, *Nuclear Futures*, p. 18. In February 1998, at the height of tensions with Iraq, it was claimed that the United States was preparing to use nuclear weapons should Iraq make use of biological weapons. In an unusual step, harsh reactions from Russia caused the United States to deny the claim. At the same time, the American administration repeated its readiness to weigh nuclear retaliation in case of chemical and biological attacks. See also Bill Arkin, "The Last Word," *Bulletin of the Atomic Scientists* 54, no. 3 (May-June 1998); U.S. Information Service, American Embassy, Moscow, *Press Release*, February 4, 1998; and excerpt of *US Department of State Press Briefing on Iraq Crisis and US Nuclear Weapons Policy*, February 5, 1998.

10 Nicholas Kralev, "U.S. Drops Pledge on Nukes," *Washington Times*, February 22, 2002.

11 See, for example, The White House, Press Briefing by Ari Fleischer, March 14, 2002.
12 Defense Secretary-designate Rumsfeld outlines policy objectives, says old deterrence concept is imperfect for new threats, January 11, 2001.
13 *Nuclear Posture Review* [excerpts], January 8, 2003, http://www.globalsecurity.org/wmd/library/policy/dod/npr.htm.
14 See, for example, "A Twisted Posture," *Boston Globe*, March 12, 2002; Eric Schmitt, "U.S. Tries to Dampen Fear Abroad on Policy," *New York Times*, March 11, 2002; and William M. Arkin, "Secret Plan Outlines the Unthinkable," *Los Angeles Times*, March 10, 2002.
15 U.S. Department of Defense, Statement on Nuclear Posture Review, March 9, 2002.
16 *NSPD-17 / HSPD-4 [unclassified version]: National Strategy to Combat Weapons of Mass Destruction*, http://www.fas.org/irp/offdocs/nspd/nspd-17.html.
17 Nicholas Kralev, "Bush Approves Nuclear Response," *Washington Times*, January 31, 2003.
18 The White House, Press Briefing by Ari Fleischer, December 11, 2002.
19 See, for example: Jan Clenski, "Nuclear Taboo Losing its Potency," *National Post*, December 31, 2002; Rajan Menon, "A Plan for Prevention or Provocation," *Los Angels Times*, December 12, 2002; and Maura Reynolds, "Nukes Parts of Terror Policy," *Los Angeles Times*, December 11, 2002.
20 The White House, *The National Security Strategy of the United States of America*, September 17, 2002, http://www.whitehouse.gov/nsc/nss.pdf.
21 "National Security and Nuclear Weapons:. Maintaining Deterrence in the 21st Century," Statement by the Secretary of Energy, Secretary of Defense, and Secretary of State, http://www.nnsa.doe.gov/docs/factsheets/2007/NA-07-FS-04.pdf, July 2007.
22 Ibid., p. 4.
23 "Third G.O.P Debate," *New York Times*, June 5, 2007.
24 Michael Luo, "Nuclear Weapons Comment Puts Obama on the Defensive," *New York Times*, August 3, 2007.
25 Anne E. Kornblut, "Clinton Demurs on Obama's Nuclear Stance," *Washington Post*, August 3, 2007.
26 Beth Fouhy, "Clinton Discussed Use of Nukes Last Year," Associated Press, August 9, 2007.
27 The only one to present a similar position to Obama's, if not even more extreme, was governor of New Mexico and former secretary of energy Bill Richardson, who said that as president of the United States he would not approve first use of nuclear weapons.
28 Lately, claims have been made that in June 2002, three months before signing the NSPD-17, President Bush signed document NSPD-14 dealing with defining policy of employing nuclear weapons, and that therefore it is possible that it replaces the PDD-60 from the Clinton era. The document itself has not been made public, but it is claimed that it expands plans for possible use of nuclear weapons against non-nuclear targets even more than as stated in the Clinton document. Even if this is true, in a comprehensive view this does not represent an essential change in the basic principles of the doctrine, but rather an expansion of them. See Hans M. Kristensen, "White House Guidance Led to New Nuclear Strike Plans Against Proliferators, Document Shows," http://www.fas.org/blog/ssp/2007/11/white_house_guidance_led_to_ne.php, November 5, 2007.
29 U.S. Senate, *S. 1914:* "*Nuclear Policy and Posture Review Act of 2007*," August 1, 2007.