

From Deterrence to Nuclear Warfighting

by Carl Osgood

Since 2001, the Bush Administration has been promulgating a new nuclear doctrine that replaces deterrence with war fighting. The January 2002 Nuclear Posture Review broke down the wall that had previously existed between the use of nuclear forces and the use of conventional forces. It redefined nuclear weapons as just another tool in the tool kit of strategic operations by which adversaries and potential adversaries could be coerced into a position favorable to the United States.

No longer does the United States view nuclear weapons as primarily a deterrence force, the use of which would be seen as a failure. Under the Bush Administration, nuclear weapons are fully integrated, doctrinally and operationally, into the full range of military operations. The U.S. Strategic Command is being reorganized to reflect this outlook, and Secretary of Defense Donald Rumsfeld has even placed a Marine, Gen. James Cartright, as its head. Historically, the Marines have not had much to do with the strategic level of war, their primary competence being in expeditionary warfare. Cartright's appointment, however, is in line with the new outlook brought in by Rumsfeld and Vice President Dick Cheney.

Columnist William Arkin commented on this transformation at a Washington, D.C. conference of the Nuclear Policy Research Institute in January of 2004. He noted that when the Strategic Command (Stratcom) was first created in the aftermath of the fall of the Soviet Union, it was seen as the custodian of nuclear forces that would be segregated from conventional military forces. However, with the merging of Stratcom and the U.S. Space Command, and the codification of the Nuclear Posture Review and the 2003 National Strategy to Combat Weapons of Mass Destruction, Stratcom has been transformed into what Arkin described as a "super global strike command," with responsibilities that include space operations; missile defense; nodal analysis on a global scale, including effects-based operations, cyber warfare, and strate-

gic deception; directed energy weapons used on a strategic level; and global, conventional precision, and earth-penetrating capabilities; and even special operations.

In other words, Stratcom has been transformed from a custodian and advocate for strategic nuclear forces, into a global warfighting organization that includes nuclear weapons as a component of its capabilities. Arkin warned that what this leads to, even with the smaller number of nuclear warheads contemplated by the Nuclear Posture Review, is “a greater level of confidence that the U.S. could disable Russian or Chinese forces and absorb any retaliation with missile defenses.”

Speaking at the same conference in January 2004, Air Force Gen. Charles Horner (ret.) declared that, from a military standpoint, nuclear weapons have no military utility. Added to that is “the horrible political cost for the decision to use them.” He reported that during the 1991 Gulf War, the U.S. official policy towards Iraqi use of chemical or biological weapons was one of “ambiguity,” but that in reality, “I knew we had no such plans” to use nuclear weapons against Iraq.

As for the present Administration’s nuclear policy, Horner, whose last position before he retired was as commander of NORAD (the North American Air Defense), described the January 2002 Nuclear Posture Review as “a good sign,” because “it shows the desperation of the folks at Omaha [the headquarters of Stratcom] to find a job.” He said the Nuclear Posture Review “is an effort by a bureaucracy to find life after the Cold War.” He warned that the danger that is developing, as a result of the reorganization of Stratcom, and the re-engineering of existing nuclear weapons to deal with hardened and deeply buried targets, is that “we may develop young people in the military who’ll believe that nuclear weapons are acceptable,” although the costs associated with using such weapons is far greater than any victory we might achieve.

Arkin and Horner’s comments have been borne out by a document that was inadvertently—or perhaps not—posted on a publicly accessible Department of Defense website in March 2005, a draft version of a document entitled “Doctrine for Joint Nuclear Operations,” dated March 15, 2005. As a draft document, it is still subject to revision; nonetheless, it reveals the development of the policy promulgated by the Nuclear Posture Review into operational doctrine, and makes significant changes to the previous policy of deterrence. This document seeks to do what Horner argued cannot be done: Make nuclear weapons militarily usable. Whereas the earlier 1995 doctrine document, which is still posted on the Joint Chiefs of Staff’s doctrine website, emphasized deterrence and the constraints on the use of nuclear weapons, the new draft document declares, “Integrating conventional and nuclear attacks will ensure the most efficient use of force and provide U.S. leaders with a broader range of strike options to address immediate contingencies.”

Nor does the draft document limit nuclear weapons to be used only against nuclear weapons states. Combatant commanders can request approval for use of nuclear weapons, not

only in response to the threatened or actual use of weapons of mass destruction against U.S. and allied forces, but also “To counter potentially overwhelming adversary conventional forces . . . For rapid and favorable war termination on U.S. terms . . .” and “To ensure success of U.S. and multinational operations.” All of this comes under an entirely new chapter on theater use of nuclear weapons, which is also discussed in the 1995 document, but in a much more limited and constrained way.

Documentation

Here are excerpts from “Joint Publication 3-12: Doctrine for Joint Nuclear Operations: Final Coordination (2) 15 March 2005.”

From Chapter 1

2. Fundamental Considerations

a) Deterrence

1) Strategic deterrence is defined as the prevention of adversary aggression or coercion that threatens the vital interests of the United States and/or our national survival. Strategic deterrence convinces adversaries not to take grievous COAs [courses of action] by means of decisive influence over their strategic decision making.

2) Deterrence broadly represents the manifestation of a potential adversary’s decision to forego actions that he would otherwise attempt. Diplomatically, the central focus of deterrence is for one nation to exert such influence over a potential adversary’s decision-making process that the potential adversary makes a deliberate choice to refrain from a COA. The focus of U.S. deterrence efforts is therefore to influence potential adversaries to withhold actions intended to harm U.S. national interests. Such a decision is based on the adversary’s perceptions of the benefits of various COAs compared with an estimation of the likelihood and magnitude of the costs or consequences corresponding to these COAs. It is these adversary perceptions and estimations that U.S. deterrent actions seek to influence. Potential adversary decision-making in the face of U.S. deterrent actions is also influenced by their strategic culture, idiosyncrasies of decision mechanisms, and the leader’s decision style, and leadership risk tolerance.

3) The effectiveness of deterrence depends on how a potential adversary views U.S. capabilities and its will to use those capabilities. If a potential adversary is convinced that U.S. forces can deny them their goals (by damage to their military, its support, or other things of value); and if that perception leads the potential adversary to limit their actions, then deterrence is effective. Deterrence of potential adversary WMD use requires the potential adversary leadership to believe the United States has both the ability and will to preempt or retaliate promptly with responses that are credible and effective.

4) Deterrence assumes an opposing actor's leadership proceeds according to the logic of self-interest, although this self-interest is viewed from differing cultural perspectives and the dictates of given situations. This will be particularly difficult with non-state actors who employ or attempt to gain use of WMD. Here deterrence may be directed at states that support their efforts as well as the terrorist organization itself. However, the continuing proliferation of WMD along with the means to deliver them increases the probability that someday a state/nonstate actor nation/terrorist may, through miscalculation or by deliberate choice, use those systems. In such cases, deterrence, even based on the threat of massive destruction may fail and the United States must be prepared to use nuclear weapons, if necessary. A major challenge of deterrence is therefore to convincingly convey both will and capability to the opposing actor.

Under "Wartime Considerations"

1) Deterring WMD Use and Conventional Military Operations. Deterrence of a WMD attack depends on the adversary's perception of its warfighting capabilities relative to those of the United States and its allies. However, wartime circumstances may alter such perceptions. Shifts in the strategic balance may result from military action in which an adversary suffers significant destruction of its military forces and means of support. Thus, when an adversary is confronted with over-

whelming conventional force or a prolonged conventional conflict the WMD threshold may be lowered, making WMD use appear to be the only viable option for regime survival.

Under "Post Wartime Considerations"

1) War Termination. . . . In the case of a global nuclear conflict an intense exchange may limit the pool of available negotiators, especially of leaders [who] have been targeted. In many foreseeable cases, however, nuclear weapons might only be used in coordination with conventional forces, with the intent to coerce war termination from the opponent.

From Chapter 2, under "Employment and Force Integration"

2) Conventional and Nuclear Force Integration. For many contingencies, existing and emerging conventional capabilities will meet anticipated requirements; however, some contingencies will remain where the most appropriate response may include the use of U.S. nuclear weapons. Integrating conventional and nuclear attacks will ensure the most efficient use of force and provide U.S. leaders with a broader range of strike options to address immediate contingencies. Integration of conventional and nuclear forces is therefore crucial to the success of any comprehensive strategy. This integration will ensure optimal targeting, minimal collateral damage, and reduce the probability of escalation.