

Nuclear Arms for Deterrence or Fighting?



By Michael Gordon

LONDON, March 10, 2002 - The Pentagon's new blueprint on nuclear forces has raised the question whether the Bush administration is lowering the threshold for using nuclear arms. In its Nuclear Posture Review, the Pentagon cites the need for new nuclear arms that could have a lower yield and produce less nuclear fallout. The weapons, the Pentagon said, could be designed to destroy underground complexes, including stores of chemical and biological arms. The targets might be situated in Iraq, Iran, Syria, Libya or North Korea, a reorientation away from cold war scenarios involving Russia. But the classified Pentagon review has ignited a new and vitally important nuclear debate. Unlike much of the arms-control discussions in recent years, this dispute is not over the number of weapons the United States needs; it is over the more fundamental issue of the circumstances in which they might be used.

Should the purpose of nuclear weapons in a post-cold-war world be essentially to deter a nuclear attack on the United States? Or should nuclear weapons be developed for fighting wars, including conflicts with non-nuclear adversaries? Critics fear that by calling for the development of more effective nuclear weapons, the Pentagon is making the unthinkable thinkable, blurring the distinction between nuclear weapons and conventional arms. The reaction overseas to the policy shift was predictably harsh, with a Russian legislator asking if Americans "have somewhat lost touch with the reality in which they live."

"Throughout the nuclear age, the fundamental goal has been to prevent the use of nuclear weapons," said Ivo Daalder, a foreign policy specialist at the Brookings Institution. "Now the policy has been turned upside down. It is to keep nuclear weapons as a tool of war-fighting rather than a tool of deterrence. If military planners are now to consider the nuclear option any time they confront a surprising military development, the distinction between nuclear and non-nuclear weapons fades away."

The Pentagon, for its part, argues that in a world full of unexpected threats and rogue states, it needs a broader array of options. It describes nuclear and non-nuclear weapons as "offensive strike systems" that can be used separately or combined in an attack. Such systems are a key pillar of a "new triad" of offensive, defensive and military-industrial resources.

"Composed of both non-nuclear systems and nuclear weapons, the strike element of the new triad can provide greater flexibility in the design and conduct of military campaigns to defeat opponents decisively," the review says. "Non-nuclear strike capabilities may be particularly useful to limit collateral damage and conflict escalation. Nuclear weapons could be employed against targets able to withstand non-nuclear attack (for example, deep underground bunkers or bio-weapons facilities). Nuclear and non-nuclear strike systems can attack an enemy's war-making capabilities and thus contribute to the defeat of the adversary and the defense of the United States and its security partners." The review, though not a contingency plan for actual use of nuclear weapons, is meant to guide decisions about their role, development and deployment over the next decade.

Throughout the cold war, nuclear weapons had an enormous role in American military planning. The Pentagon not only built a formidable strategic arsenal to deter a nuclear attack on the United States; it also reserved the right to use nuclear weapons to deter a Warsaw Pact attack on Europe. The Pentagon deployed a vast array of nuclear arms, from ocean-spanning missiles to nuclear mines and depth charges. The Kremlin did much the same. But as the cold war waned, so did the notion that nuclear weapons could be used to fight a war. The United States and Russia withdrew their tactical nuclear weapons from Europe and from their fleets. While Washington did not formally give up its option to make the first use of nuclear weapons against a Warsaw Pact attack, it cast the use of such weapons as a last resort.

With the end of the cold war, the need for nuclear weapons seemed to fade further. Arms control advocates pushed for radical cuts in the American and Russian arsenals and for taking nuclear-tipped missiles off alert, though hard-liners insisted that there was still a need for nuclear arms.

With the Nuclear Posture Review, President Bush appears to have a foot in each camp. He has embraced the call for deeper cuts in strategic arms, though the reductions he is seeking are probably not much deeper than the Clinton administration had in mind when changes in procedures for counting nuclear weapons are taken into account. But Mr. Bush's Pentagon has also pushed for new and more usable nuclear weapons. At same time, it is working hard to improve conventional weapons. In effect, the Pentagon is urging the development of an arsenal in which nuclear weapons could be used against an adversary's non-nuclear forces, while promoting the development of conventional arms that could be used against nuclear targets. The potential blurring of those roles, critics fear, would eliminate the firebreak between nuclear and conventional war. Some specialists also argue that it sends a message to third world powers that nuclear weapons are militarily useful.

"By emphasizing the important role of nuclear weapons, the Pentagon is encouraging other nations to think that it is important to have them as well," said Robert S. Norris, a nuclear weapons expert at the Natural Resources Defense Council. Today, senior Bush administration officials sought to dampen the criticism. They argued that the Nuclear Posture Review was a mere policy document, not an operational plan, and that the decision to develop dramatically new types of weapons had not yet been made.

"This is prudent military planning, and it is the kind of planning I think the American people would expect," Secretary of State Colin Powell said on the CBS News Program "Face the Nation," adding, "We are not developing brand new nuclear weapons, and we are not planning to undergo any testing." Vice President Dick Cheney, who arrived in London late tonight at the beginning of a long tour of allied nations, "will put it in context and in perspective," Secretary Powell said. The Pentagon review, however, clearly points to important changes by touting the need for new variable- yield or reduced-yield nuclear weapons, and improved targeting systems so they could be rapidly used in war.

"Greater flexibility is needed with respect to nuclear force and planning than was the case during the cold war," the review said. "Nuclear attack options that vary in scale, scope and purpose will complement other military capabilities."