

The Upgrading of U.S. Nuclear Deterrence

By Ni Lexiong

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A Dangerous "Idea"

If we think of the United States as a person, the recently leaked Pentagon document "Nuclear Posture Review" indicates that this person has just recently developed a new idea. Explanations about this Nuclear Posture Review from top officials such as President Bush, Secretary of State Powell and the National Security Adviser Rice also show that this person has yet to figure out specific measures to for implementing this new idea .

When a person develops a certain idea, two scenarios can occur. First, an idea may just be an idea; it may not be implemented at all. Secondly, an idea will be quickly put into practice and translated into specific actions. The Pentagon's Nuclear Posture Review has caused such a big stir because some dangerous "ideas" that never existed before now have come out of the Pentagon, despite the fact that specific measures to implement these dangerous ideas have yet to be worked out. In international affairs, implementation of dangerous policies is the cause of all disastrous events. All dangerous policies come directly from certain "ideas." This is why Nuclear Posture Review has been so shocking to the world, even though it only expresses an "idea."

By military protocol, a defense plan of any nuclear power, without exceptions, contains a contingency plan in which nuclear weapons are used to strike the enemy, though the pre-condition of such a contingency is "in case." But this kind of plan can only be implicit, not explicit. It's not necessary to explain such a plan by either side of the conflict because it will be perfectly understood by all. The Bush Administration officials could have easily denied the leaked classified state secrets of the Nuclear Posture Review. But they did not. Instead, they defended the positions that were contained in the leaked document. The failure to choose denial indicates the Bush Administration's willingness to reveal such a secret nuclear plan to the world. This action has thus become quite significant.

Was the leaking of the Nuclear Posture Review deliberate or accidental? This question is insignificant. This author believes that the Review is a classified state secret. Maybe the U.S. government did not mean to leak it initially. But when it leaked out, then the government decided to use the leaked document to test the reactions of the world, and to scare those open and hidden enemies of the U.S., which really is not such a bad move. In fact, this move is a smart one. After the 9-11 attacks, the U.S. has formed a lethargic coalition against terrorism. The only tangible sign of victory in the war against terrorism is the overthrow of the Taliban government in Afghanistan by force. But the remaining Taliban forces and Al Qaeda organization are still tenaciously resisting the coalition forces. Bin Laden and Omar are still at large; they are nowhere to be found. The type of

terrorist attacks that occurred on September 11 last year has become a sinister shadow that haunts Americans and refuses to go away. The circumstance has forced the U.S. government to ride on the momentum of the victory over the Taliban regime and further show off its nuclear machismo. This way the U.S. can hide its helplessness in the war against terrorism, and can scare its enemies, real or potential. The leaking of the Nuclear Posture Review serves precisely this need.

U.S. Nuclear Policy “Is Considering Certain Changes”

Then, how has the deterrence from the Nuclear Posture Review manifested itself? What kind of message does the “new idea” in the Review convey to us? Let us combine the contents of the Nuclear Posture Review and the contents of Secretary Powell’s statements on March 12, 2002 before the Senate Appropriation Committee, and then we get the following messages:

1. To specify the areas in which the U.S. may use nuclear weapons: including the areas of Arab-Israeli conflict, the conflict in the Korean Peninsula in the case of North Korea attacking South Korea, and the conflict over the Taiwan Strait between China and Taiwan.

1. 2. To list, for the very first time, the seven countries that will become the nuclear targets of the U.S. They are Russia, China, Iraq, Iran, Syria, Libya and North Korea.

3. To state the three circumstances in which nuclear weapons may be used: nuclear weapons could be used against targets able to withstand non-nuclear attack, in retaliation for attacks by nuclear, biological or chemical weapons, or "in the event of surprising military developments."

These three “ideas” seek to warn the enemies of the U.S. that it would be futile to attack the U.S. through conventional warfare; and that the U.S. will no longer fight the same way as it did in Korea and Vietnam when the U.S. was placed in a dilemma of choosing either to use nuclear weapons or choosing defeat. The third message listed above is of key importance. It shows that when the U.S. cannot win a conventional war, the U.S. will use nuclear weapons to achieve its goals. The meaning of the phrase “against targets able to withstand non-nuclear attack” is broad and vague, and can be subjected to multiple interpretations. It can mean the specific battlefield fortifications such as the military structures in the desert of Iraq, and mountain caves of Afghanistan. It can also mean an already defeated country that is still defiant of the U.S., such as Iraq which, despite its resounding defeat in the Gulf War, have steadfastly refused to allow U.N. nuclear weapons inspections. The phrase “in the event of surprising military developments” is also a key part. Secretary Powell has stated, “the gap of conventional forces between the U.S. and any other country or countries has widened since ten years ago; therefore, we are not stupid. When we have such superiority in conventional forces, we will not suddenly announce, ‘Let’s use nuclear weapons.’” From this perspective, we can see that

the U.S. may not use nuclear weapons at the beginning of a war. Only when conventional forces fail to be effective would U.S. forces be in serious trouble. At that point, the U.S. will use nuclear weapons, (which eliminates any hope for the enemy to force the U.S. into a defeat purely through conventional war methods.)

The deterrence posed by this is all-dimensional. It affects the international affairs that the U.S. deals with, and the current anti-terrorism campaign. It provides a strategic as well as a tactical deterrence to terrorist organizations. For the Middle East region, it increases the pressure on Iraq, helping to convince the doubtful spectators of an imminent second major blow to Iraq. It serves as a warning to the Arab states not to harbor any hopes of another joint action against Israel. Washington's withdrawal from the Anti-Ballistic Missile Treaty and the successful 6th test to intercept missiles on 15 March 2002 and now the leak of the Nuclear Posture Review all serve to pressure the Russians in the upcoming Bush-Putin Summit in Moscow at the end of May to reach a nuclear weapons reduction agreement that is favorable to the U.S. The Nuclear Posture Review also serves to put greater pressure on North Korea. On the issue of Taiwan, the U.S., in addition to providing conventional weaponry to Taiwan, also adds nuclear protection, thus furthering pressure on China.

In sum, the U.S. is considering certain changes in its nuclear policy, even though the Bush Administration has denied that a fundamental policy change has occurred. This new consideration for change contains a willingness to include nuclear weapons in a conventional war. This has gone beyond Mutually Assured Destruction of the Cold War. But this author still believes that taken as a whole, the current nuclear policy of the U.S. has not gone beyond the framework of "nuclear deterrence." After all, the missile defense system is still in its nascent stage of test and trial. It is far from completion, and thus unable to guarantee deterrence of nuclear attacks on the U.S. Therefore, these changes in consideration are just that—something being considered not formulated or clarified. Yet, the effects of such contemplation for changes are unprecedented: By utilizing a position of trying to break the nuclear deterrence framework and applying nuclear force to conventional wars, the U.S. has greatly strengthened its nuclear deterrence. And all this was done through the "unofficial approach" of a convenient leak.

Why is the U.S. unwilling to promise "no first use" of nuclear weapons?

War, like all other professions, has its own ethical and moral standards, i.e., the warrior's ethics. After the advent of the nuclear weapons, western countries started to discuss the problem of nuclear ethics. "Stop using weapons for war" has since become universally recognized as the highest standard of warrior's ethic. Therefore, if we use nuclear deterrence with skills and moderation, nuclear deterrence alone can be a good thing, in sync with the principle of "stop using weapons for war." As a specific manifestation of nuclear deterrence, the policy of "no first use" has become a concrete method of realizing the highest standard of warrior's ethic.

Therefore, "no first use" of nuclear weapons in the nuclear age has the potential of becoming a nuclear moral principle. But for Americans, they cannot abide by this principle. This has something to do with the history of the U.S. nuclear development. The

U.S. has been the first and only country that has used nuclear weapons. When nuclear bombs were used by the U. S. against fascism in World War II as a measure of self-defense, it was considered justified. So, the Americans have come to believe that “to use nuclear weapons when it is justified,” but not “never to use nuclear weapons first under any circumstances.” The Americans see the latter as conflicting with American historical experience and American values. If the U.S. now or in the future promises “never to first use nuclear weapons under any circumstances,” and makes it a moral principle, that will be equivalent to denying the legitimacy and justness of their first use of nuclear weapons in the past.

Besides the issue of nuclear ethics, the fact that the U.S. does not promise “no use of nuclear weapons under any circumstances” is also related to its national interests. Such a promise would restrict America’s nuclear superiority as a major power. Imagine this—when encountering a formidable enemy capable of fighting the U.S. to a draw or even overpowering the U.S. in a conventional war, the U.S. can defeat the enemy with its own superior nuclear weapons. But if the U.S. had made a promise of never to use nuclear weapons first, the U.S. would have no other option than to announce total capitulation to its enemy after defeat in a conventional war? Wouldn’t this be bad and idiotic?

What We Can Learn From The Nuclear Behavior Of The U.S.

To predict the future of how the U.S. will use its nuclear weapons, we can get some clues from how the U.S. used its nuclear bombs against Japan during World War II. In 1945, the U.S. used its nuclear weapons under the following circumstances:

1. Moral high ground, with an emphasis on the just war. The target country was the aggressor and public enemy in violation of human justice. The U.S. was fighting not just for self-defense, but also liberation of other invaded nations or countries. The motivation for using nuclear weapons was justice, and none other.
3. Today, the U.S., along with many other nuclear countries, stresses the fact that only when its national survival is severely threatened does the U.S. government consider the use of nuclear weapons. Yet, in 1945, the situation was not entirely so. At the time, the U.S. had already gained decisive advantages in the conventional sense. The U.S. used its nuclear weapons when the final victory could have been achieved through conventional means.
4. The U.S. used its nuclear weapons against a non-nuclear country. Japan at the time did not have nuclear weapons.
5. The U.S. used its nuclear weapons without any possibility of suffering from nuclear retaliation.

6. The direct motive for using the nuclear weapons was to reduce the casualties of American soldiers.

The above describes the circumstances under which the U.S. used nuclear weapons against Japan in 1945. Today and in the future, if the U.S. decides to use nuclear weapons again, it probably will mainly rely on circumstances 1, 4 and 5. When dealing with non-nuclear countries, there are few technical problems. Yet when dealing with a nuclear power, there is a technical difficulty. By initiating the use of nuclear weapons against a target country, the U.S. must ensure the complete destruction of that country's second-strike capability. Technically, this is still a difficult problem for the U.S. From this perspective, some aggressive suggestions in the Nuclear Posture Review are just dangerous dreams conjured up inside the Pentagon. The enhancement of nuclear deterrence cannot have good consequence, but would only engender greater risks for the Americans. But the Americans are striving hard to develop a missile defense system at any cost. Once the missile defense system is successfully developed, which will enable the U.S. to have an effective interception capability, other nuclear nations will become de facto non-nuclear nations. By that time, the policy of enhancing nuclear deterrence will achieve its specific outcome.

The fact that the U.S. is considering to enhance its nuclear deterrence should come to us as no surprise. The impetus for the U.S. to become a nuclear hegemon goes hand in hand with its desire to become the world cop. Even though the U.S. constantly adjusts itself according to the strengths of its nemeses, the ultimate goal of the U.S. will never change. In the past, when facing the powerful Soviet nuclear arsenal, the U.S. could only practice the policy of "Mutually Assured Destruction." After the collapse of the Soviet Union, the U.S. alone has enjoyed superpower status in the world. With its great strengths in economy, science and technology, the U.S. has naturally moved to achieve the higher goal of "Unilaterally Assured Destruction." The idea of increasing nuclear deterrence as expressed in the Pentagon's Nuclear Posture Review is one specific step toward this higher goal. Of course, this action is taken with coordination from other directions. For example, the U.S. has also moved simultaneously to take the moral high ground, labeling its possible nuclear target countries as members of the "Axis of Evil;" the U.S. has also moved to research and develop small-type, precision-targeted tactical nuclear weapon; to speed up the development of missile defense system to avoid nuclear attacks from other countries; to prevent nuclear proliferation, etc. All these actions have been taken and coordinated in the disguise of various beautiful reasons.

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