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US Nuclear Posture, an Aggressive Deterrence

Eine Analyse der «Doctrine for Joint Nuclear Operations», 15. März 2005

Unbemerkt von der Öffentlichkeit und verschwiegen von gewissen Teilen der Elite der Schweiz findet seit einigen Jahren eine gezielte Aufrüstung durch die Nuklearmächte der Welt statt. Alle Nuklearmächte modernisieren ihre Nuklearsenale, rüsten gar auf und formulieren neue Einsatzkonzeptionen für diese Waffen. Dies trifft auch für die USA zu. Ende 2001 hat die Bush-Administration das Dokument «Nuclear Posture Review» veröffentlicht, und im September 2002 erschien der präsidiale Bericht «National Security Strategy». Beide Dokumente zusammen weisen auf den Ersteinsatz von Nuklearwaffen, den präemptiven oder den präventiven Nuklearschlag, durch die Weltmacht gegen Schurkenstaaten hin. Nun ist auf dem Internet der Bericht «US Doctrine for Joint Nuclear Operations» erhältlich. Aus diesem Dokument wird ersichtlich, dass die Weltmacht USA, wenn ein Krieg mit konventionellen Streitkräften für sie ungünstig ausgehen könnte, auch nukleare Ersteinsätze gegen Staaten ohne Nuklearwaffen plant. In ihrem Aufsatz weist Fiona Lombardi zu Recht darauf hin, dass eine solche Planung zur Öffnung der Büchse der Pandora führt. In einer militärischen Auseinandersetzung wird der Fall denkbar, dass auch andere Nuklearmächte ohne Zögern ihre Nuklearwaffen gegen einen konventionell stärkeren Gegner einsetzen könnten. Hoffen wir, dass in der Schweiz diese bedrohliche Entwicklung zur Kenntnis genommen wird und entsprechende Vorbereitungen an die Hand genommen werden.

Fiona Lombardi

Within the forthcoming publication of the US Doctrine for Joint Nuclear Operations, the Pentagon highlights the intention to still stick to its nuclear strategic and tactical arsenal for deterrence purposes, albeit striking pre-emptively will be an option, should unconventional or even overwhelmingly conventional threats be given, or simply as demonstration of the US intent and nuclear capability. The described US nuclear posture, characterised by a constant alert and high readiness of nuclear forces, lowers dramatically the deployment threshold of nuclear weapons everywhere on the globe.

Introduction

In the early 1990s, at the end of the bipolar, atomic Era of the Cold War based on the notion of mutual assured destruction through intercontinental ballistic missiles (ICBMs), sea-launched ballistic missiles (SLBMs), and heavy bombers, the hope that the worst-case scenario had been definitively overcome was huge and common within Western society. But the nuclear dissuasive role did not reach its end at that time; on the contrary it has been tailored to the new challenges of the multi-polar world.

The current ongoing events point to the nuclear option which, after a phase down, has become topical again, proved by the ambitions of many leaders worldwide to come into possession of such weapons. Furthermore, the five traditional acknowledged atomic powers headed by the US have been joined by India, Pakistan and Israel and all have manifested their intention to stick to their unconventional arsenals, even if for different reasons. However, the most aggressive doctrines in this domain have been developed by US Governments and the Russian Federation, foreseeing the first-use of A-weapon under specific conditions; but if the Russian strategic nuclear deployment area is mostly restricted to its geostrategic environment, the US is, on the contrary, describing nuclear missions as having growing importance for totally new applications.

Signals of the nuclear revival

In 2001, during Bush's first term in office, his administration went public with «The Nuclear Posture Review» (NPR), an innovative doctrine, highlighting the US intentions and objectives in the nuclear domain and defines the enemies of the US. Now, in 2005, with some delay on the fixed deadline, the Pentagon has completed the revision of the Doctrine for Joint Nuclear Operations (2nd draft) which, dating back to 1995, is based on many NPR-assumptions. The up-to-date Doctrine is being submitted to the President for approval and inevitable cosmetic changes. Its final version is foreseen for later this fall.

US Doctrine: N-Weapons against WMD

Two issues are of great concern for the US: the proliferation of Weapons of Mass Destruction (WMD), such as atomic, biological and chemical warheads, to states and non-state actors, and the fact that approximately thirty nations world-wide have already gained possession of WMD some years ago. Not all of these countries are well-meaning towards the US, who is worried about their huge vulnerability towards this threat.

Due to the military supremacy of the US, adversaries could opt for the use of unconventional means, in order to cause as much damage as possible, from inside or even outside the national territory. Indeed, a nuclear explosion at high altitude sparking an electromagnetic pulse would allegedly be able to paralyze the whole global communication network, as well as the high electronics and computers which the US military organisation relies on.

In the United States the possibility of such an event is not questioned: according to the Pentagon's experts, history has provided sufficient examples that the unpredictable and irrational sometimes occurs and they are working to ensure the US doesn't get caught unprepared. Should dissuasion fail, Nuclear weapons have been identified as the ideal instrument to preempt or retaliate against WMD use by regional aggressors (i.e. rogue states) and non-state actors.

Theatre Nuclear Operations (TNOs)

TNOs are intended as regional (theatre) military operations, which can be supported by N-weapons. Two or more different services of the US armed forces take part together under the authority of a joint forces command.

The geographic combatant commander defines a priori theatre objectives in conformity with the national security strategy, selects targets on the basis of intelligence information and develops war plans, integrating conventional[1] and unconventional means with the support of the US Strategic Command (USSTRATCOM), responsible

[1] Conventional missions are, amongst others, in-flight refuelling, combat search and rescue, neutralisation of adversary air defence and nuclear weapons recovery. Within TNOs, conventional forces are rather in the background, as their performance can not keep up with that of nuclear forces.

for the nuclear forces. The joint task force staff and other experts charged with the development of the operational details, such as the appropriate yield of N-weapons and delivery methods. The strategic support team will investigate the consequences of the detonation, i.e. the radioactive fall-out and the entity of collateral damage and possible reactions to nuclear strikes are carefully addressed as well.

TNOs are the outcome of this elaborate process, summarizing all the relevant information for the effective accomplishment of established missions and strictly aligned to national interests. Actually, beside the theoretical well defined modus operandi, it is questionable, whether the different services can really put their old rivalries aside and ensure unity of efforts by planning together effective theatre joint forces operations, or if the TNOs are going to be unsatisfying compromises.

The geographic combatant command continually monitors theatre events and developments, and when he considers the situation has escalated to warrant the deployment of nuclear forces, it is up to him to ask for the Presidential go-ahead. The deployment of Air Force, Navy, Army and Marines is co-ordinated within USSTRATCOM, the Services and the geographic combatant command, and comes into consideration in following cases:

- by the intention or the performance of an attack with WMD against US, multinational or alliance forces and respective civilian populations. US strikes can aim at all enemy facilities related to WMD, its production, storage and deployment (first-use)
- by the imminent attack from adversary biological weapons, whose effects can be annihilated only with nuclear weapons (first-use)
- by countering overwhelmingly hostile forces, concluding a war and ensuring the success of the US (first-use)
- as demonstration of the US nuclear potential, in order to deter adversary use of WMD (first-use)
- as retaliation against a WMD attack

TNOs can rely on tactical and strategic instruments, like long-range bombers and Dual Capable Aircraft delivering gravity bombs and cruise missiles, as well as attack submarines delivering Tomahawk Land Attack Missiles, submarine-launched ballistic missiles (SLBM) and finally ICBMs. Toward this comprehensive equipment, the US is provided with a range of nuclear options covering the whole globe. This variety of available tools to TNOs represents an innovation, as they were traditionally provided with tactical nuclear weapons only.

Additional to atomic warheads, the second component of the same leg belonging to the new US triad, namely the missile defence, together with conventional forces, will provide for the survivability and effectiveness of the forces deployed in theatre operations. However, the fact that missiles can be armed with both conventional and nuclear warheads can lead the counterpart to dangerous misevaluations and even a nuclear escalation.

Critical Remarks

The US Doctrine stresses the importance of an effective deterrence, assuming that adversaries, who are aware of the credibility of the US military capability of focusing both on pre-emption and retaliation, should consequently be discouraged from keeping up with their programmes involving the use of WMD. Actually, the US has been the first country directly experiencing a gap within this argument: post-modern terrorists indeed carry out their operations with such a strong motivation and faith that any nuclear deterrence is not powerful enough to stop their mission. On the contrary, the risk is high that a US strike would not meet the pursued aim and perhaps even obtain the opposite result. Furthermore, in the event of attacks by small groups of individuals it is not clear how TNOs can be deployed. The connection between the 9/11 attacks and Afghanistan may remain a unicum indeed.

The dissuasion strategy by TNOs can also have a negative repercussion on other states, providing an incentive to the search for unconventional weapons or the enhancement of their current possession and/or production. This issue exceeds the often mentioned rogue states. For example, when the US announced its intention to support Taiwan with military protection and to establish a missile theater there, China reacted with the enhancement of its nuclear program, and especially its intercontinental strike capability.

Analysing the TNOs described within the Doctrine's Draft, it is worrisome to ascertain how far the role of nuclear weapons has been revitalised, by defining the deployment context just as a conflict and no more a war. Tools that were considered as weapons of the last resort during the cold war are now just another warfare option, albeit their lethality has not changed in the course of the decades.

Despite of political rhetoric and lots of empty promises, the US Doctrine's Final Draft sticks to the further existence of a nuclear arsenal made up by 1700–2200 operationally deployed strategic warheads, stresses the constant high readiness of nuclear forces and lowers the threshold of their deployment anywhere on the globe. Within the Doctrine for Joint Nuclear Operations legal objections on the (even pre-emptive) deployment of nuclear warheads are superficially addressed and even more quickly dismissed. It is based on the highly questionable assumption that any customary and conventional law prohibits nations from deploying N-weapons in armed conflicts. The logical conclusion is that the US seems to feel legally free to use them, when they consider the appropriate moment has come. Throughout the Doctrine, no words have addressed the moral and ethic issues.

Another critically questionable issue refers to the missile defence integrated within TNOs. When President Bush presented this subject to the public and the Parliament it was conceived as a system providing an enhanced security level for the US population within the domestic territory. This has been indeed the main argument justifying the US withdrawal from the ABM Treaty and additional financial support. What the Doctrine highlights is, on the contrary, a protection for nuclear forces located abroad.

In summary, the nuclear revival occurring at present in the US is matter of great concern for everyone, as – according to the Doctrine for Joint Nuclear Operations – the deployment of unconventional instruments in the name of national security interests is becoming a question of when and where the Pandora's box will be opened, and not of whether it will ever take place. The current strategic landscape seems nowadays to be even more dangerous and indefinable than during the bipolar epoch. ■

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