

US plans widespread use of nuclear weapons in war

Bush orders Pentagon to target seven nations for attack

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The Bush administration has told the US military to greatly expand preparations for the use of nuclear weapons in future wars, according to press reports on the weekend which have been confirmed by the Pentagon and White House.

The Pentagon has been directed to develop contingency plans for nuclear attacks on seven different countries. These include China and Russia, the two powers which have long been targeted by the US nuclear arsenal; Iraq, Iran and North Korea, the three countries demonized by Bush as the “axis of evil” in his State of the Union speech; and Libya and Syria.

An initial draft of this report, called the “Nuclear Posture Review,” was delivered to Congress on January 8. A copy of the classified material was obtained by William Arkin, military columnist for the *Los Angeles Times*, and the newspaper reported its contents March 9. The *New York Times* obtained the same material a day later.

In addition to the naming of targeted countries—the first such list ever made public—the Nuclear Posture Review outlines a much broader range of political, strategic and tactical scenarios under which the US government would use nuclear weapons.

The report says the Pentagon should be prepared to use nuclear weapons in an Arab-Israeli conflict, in a war between China and Taiwan, or in an attack from North Korea on South Korea. They might also become necessary in an attack by Iraq on Israel or another neighbor, it said.

The last contingency is the one which is most imminent, since the US is openly preparing for a military assault on Iraq, which could well provoke the launching of Iraqi Scud missiles against Israel, as in 1991 during the previous US-Iraq war. Based on the criteria outlined in the Pentagon review, the firing of such missiles from mobile truck-mounted launchers could be answered by the dropping of an atomic bomb on Iraqi military facilities in the western desert, or even on Baghdad.

The Pentagon document, for the first time, spells out the determination of US war planners to use nuclear weapons in a military conflict in which the opposing side either did not possess nuclear weapons or had them but did not use them. The language of the report is broad and open-ended.

The review says nuclear weapons “could be employed against targets able to withstand nonnuclear attack,” i.e., under any circumstances where a conventional US military assault was

proving to be unsuccessful. Such a contingency could develop at almost any point in Afghanistan, as the recent fighting near Gardez has shown.

Even more sweeping is the suggestion that nuclear weapons could be used “in the event of surprising military developments.” Pentagon officials told the *New York Times* that such language was intended to cover the possible use of new types of weapons of mass destruction by terrorists, but it could apply equally well to a terrorist attack like September 11, which the Bush administration claims came as a total surprise. The Nuclear Posture Review would seem to authorize nuclear retaliation in the event of any such attack.

The Pentagon planning document also calls for a wider range of tactical uses for nuclear weapons, through the development of smaller-scale and lower-yield warheads that could have a practical use for such tasks as the destruction of heavily fortified underground bunkers. The review calls for building more precise “warheads that reduce collateral damage.” Developing such warheads would require the resumption of underground nuclear testing by the United States.

The report declares: “Nuclear attack options that vary in scale, scope, and purpose will complement other military capabilities.” The Air Force would modify its extended-range cruise missile and the F-35 Joint Strike Fighter to carry nuclear warheads. Even US Special Forces operators would be able to call in nuclear strikes, playing the same intelligence gathering and targeting roles for nuclear weapons that they did for conventional bombs and missiles in Afghanistan.

The overall import of these changes is to transform nuclear bombs from the “last resort” into weapons which can be used at will on the battlefield. As one nuclear expert, Joseph Cirincione of the Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, observed, “This clearly makes nuclear weapons a tool for fighting a war, rather than deterring them.”

The Nuclear Posture Review, despite its ponderous bureaucratic name, is an intensely political document. When the incoming Reagan administration sought to reverse three decades of Cold War policy based on the doctrine of containment, it drafted a new Nuclear Posture Review in 1981 which discarded the doctrine of Mutual Assured Destruction and set a goal of achieving nuclear strategic superiority. Its aim was to ensure that the US would

survive a devastating nuclear exchange with the Soviet Union with enough intact and unused nuclear weapons to “prevail” in a post-apocalypse world.

This lunatic perspective remained the official US military doctrine until the Clinton administration ordered a review in 1994, which was not completed until 1997, with the issuance of a new planning document. The Clinton document remains classified, but press reports suggest that it contained the first language authorizing the retargeting of US missiles and bombers from Russia to China, North Korea and several countries in the Middle East.

The Bush administration’s nuclear plan is another act of brazen lawlessness by a government which thumbs its nose at international obligations. The US is bound, as a signatory to the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty, not to use nuclear weapons against non-nuclear powers. The Bush directive does not yet violate the letter of the treaty, but it instructs the Pentagon to make all the necessary preparations to do so. It is an announcement in advance that the US government will violate the treaty whenever it deems it desirable.

The swift White House confirmation of the report in the *Los Angeles Times*, and the willingness of the Pentagon officials to discuss the issue—normally a closely guarded secret—suggest that the report may be a deliberate leak by the Bush administration, timed to advance its military and diplomatic agenda by intimidating both potential adversaries and prospective allies in the Middle East.

The report was published the day before Vice President Cheney left Washington for a 10-day trip to Britain and the Middle East to line up support for the next stage in the US campaign of military aggression, which is almost certainly the launching of a massive assault on Iraq. And it comes two days before Bush gives a nationally televised speech, on the six-month anniversary of the September 11 attacks, in which he is expected to threaten American military intervention in many more countries, in addition to the current deployment of troops and military advisers in Afghanistan, Central Asia, the Philippines, Georgia, Yemen and Colombia.

The British-based *Observer* newspaper reported March 10 that Cheney was bringing to London a request that the Blair government contribute 25,000 troops towards the 250,000 which are projected as necessary for the conquest of Iraq.

The newspaper said that a considerable military buildup towards ground war in Iraq is already under way, including Special Forces training of Iraqi exiles and Kurdish forces in the north of Iraq, the deployment of a battalion of 25 Longbow Apache attack helicopters in Kuwait, and the overhauling of 5,000 US fighting vehicles, both tanks and armored cars, which have been in storage in Kuwait since the 1991 war.

The *New York Times*, in its analysis of the report, noted the one-sided and bullying character of the new nuclear doctrine, writing cynically, “unlike the old strategic formula of mutual assured destruction, or MAD, in which nuclear superpowers deter each other into a détente, the Pentagon’s new saber-rattling is meant to signal something different. That is a unilateral assured destruction...”

The Pentagon report specifically denounces the arms control treaties between the US and the Soviet Union which were characteristic of the Cold War, declaring, “That old process is incompatible with the flexibility U.S. planning and forces now require.” The new doctrine makes it clear that it was only the existence of the USSR—despite the treacherous counterrevolutionary politics of the Stalinist bureaucracy—that blocked American imperialism from using its nuclear arsenal more or less at will during the last half century.

With the collapse of the Soviet Union, the United States is projecting military power into Central Asia, seeking to dominate the oil-rich region around the Caspian Sea, and preparing for the second major war in a decade in the Persian Gulf. And now, with the issuance of this thinly veiled nuclear ultimatum, every regime in the region—and throughout the world—is put on notice that if they oppose American policies they can be targeted for nuclear incineration.

The release of the nuclear planning document must send shock waves throughout the world. The declaration that nuclear weapons are to become a practical weapon of war, for the first time since Hiroshima and Nagasaki, is extraordinarily provocative. It makes it clear to anyone not blinded by propaganda that the United States has become the most reckless international bully since German imperialism in the 1930s and 1940s.

The US government publicly acknowledges it is targeting seven countries—whose combined population amounts to a quarter of the human race—for nuclear attack. These countries must necessarily assume that the United States intends to carry out these threats, and they must plan accordingly. But any defensive countermeasures which they undertake, including the development of their own weapons of mass destruction to serve as a deterrent, will be portrayed by the Bush administration as an action which justifies the attack.

The Bush administration’s policies have objective implications. The new Pentagon doctrine brings the world far closer to the actual use of nuclear weapons of war, with incalculable consequences for humanity. Indeed, such a war is all but inevitable unless other social forces intervene and take the decision out of the hands of the imperialists. That is the task facing the international working class.



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