

NATO must prepare for nuclear first strike, report urges

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A chilling report prepared by a group of top military commanders from the US and its NATO allies declares that the alliance must be prepared to launch a preemptive nuclear first strike because of “asymmetric threats and global challenges” posed to the West.

“The first use of nuclear weapons must remain in the quiver of escalation as the ultimate instrument to prevent the use of weapons of mass destruction, in order to avoid truly existential dangers,” declares the report, which is titled “Towards a Grand Strategy for an Uncertain World: Renewing Transatlantic Partnership.”

The authors of the document, which has been submitted to the Pentagon and the NATO command, include Gen. John Shalikashvili (ret.), who was chief of the joint chiefs of staff under the Clinton administration, as well as former chiefs of the armed forces in Britain, France, Germany and the Netherlands.

According to a report published Tuesday in the *British Guardian*, “The manifesto has been written following discussions with active commanders and policymakers, many of whom are unable or unwilling to publicly air their views.” It is expected to be a key subject of discussion at a NATO summit to be held in Bucharest in April.

The report presents a grim picture of the 21st century, portraying the major Western powers as under siege from real and potential enemies as well as objective changes in the global situation.

It calls attention to population growth and climate change as exacerbating world conflicts and warns that terrorism, proliferation of weapons of mass destruction and the struggle for “scarce resources,” particularly oil, poses new threats. It also singles out China, Russia and Iran as actual or potential enemies.

In response to these supposed threats, the report calls for the NATO alliance to adopt a strategy of “escalation dominance, the use of a full bag of both carrots and sticks—and indeed all instruments of soft and hard power, ranging from the diplomatic protest to nuclear weapons.”

It warns that “traditional forms and methods of governments and international organizations,” particularly the UN, are incapable of proceeding with sufficient speed to maintain such dominance, and therefore a sweeping overhaul of NATO is required to create an adequate instrument for global intervention.

In a tone that recalls nothing so much as the rantings of Dr. Strangelove, the report states, “Nuclear weapons are the ultimate instrument of an asymmetric response—and at the same time the ultimate tool of escalation.”

It continues: “Regrettably, nuclear weapons—and with them the option of first use—are indispensable, since there is simply no realistic prospect of a nuclear-free world. On the contrary, the risk of further proliferation is imminent and, with it, the danger that nuclear war fighting, albeit limited in scope, might become possible.... In sum, nuclear weapons remain indispensable, and nuclear escalation continues to remain an element of any modern strategy.”

The report goes on to describe “nuclear escalation” as “the ultimate step in responding symmetrically, and at the same time the most powerful way of inducing uncertainty in an opponent’s mind.”

While the passages on the prospects of a preemptive nuclear strike name no specific targets, there is little doubt that the immediate “opponent” in the mind of its authors is Iran. The document perversely portrays a nuclear first strike as an instrument for preventing nuclear weapons proliferation.

Iran is “strongly suspected of engaging in a military nuclear programme,” the report states. It continues: “The willingness of the USA and its coalition partners to rid the world of the two terrible regimes of Saddam Hussein’s Iraq and the Taliban has left a vacuum that Iran is stepping into, with the world unable to contain Iran’s growing influence in the region.”

“As a nuclear power,” it continues, “Iran could become immune to international sanctions. Furthermore, it would dominate the region, which possesses the world’s largest oil and gas reserves.”

This last question is clearly the principal concern among the ruling elite in both the US and Europe—that the major powers would face a direct challenge to their control over strategic energy supplies now dominated by the multinational oil companies.

The report essentially reiterates positions already enunciated by the Bush administration in Washington, which has repeatedly stressed that it is keeping “all options on the table,” including the use of nuclear weapons, in its global war on terror and its confrontations with so-called “rogue states.”

In 2002, the US administration drafted a Nuclear Posture Review that spelled out the kind of preemptive nuclear first-strike policy put forward in the NATO report. It declared that the US “reserves the right to respond with overwhelming force—including the use of nuclear weapons—to the use of [WMD] against the United States, our forces abroad, and friends and allies.” It went on to assert that the US must develop “the capabilities to detect and destroy an adversary’s WMD assets before these weapons are used.”

In 2006, investigative journalist Seymour Hersh cited extensive intelligence and military sources in a report that revealed the Bush administration had drafted plans for a preemptive attack on Iran, which included the use of “tactical nuclear devices” to obliterate not only the country’s nuclear program, but also large elements of its security forces and basic infrastructure.

The document submitted to NATO by the former chiefs of staff echoes the twisted logic utilized by the Bush administration in its attempt to justify its policy of preventive war.

“The early use of military responses is often linked to pre-emption and prevention—both elements of modern strategy,” it states. “Both are applicable throughout a crisis or conflict, and neither is necessarily linked to a specific set of instruments, such as the military. Pre-emption is the reactive response, when an opponent’s action is considered imminent; whereas prevention is a proactive step aimed at denial—and thus at conflict termination—in a situation in which the threat is not yet imminent, but in which evidence indisputably points to the unavoidability of conflict. Pre-emption is widely seen as a legal act of self-defence under customary international law, whereas the question of the legality of a preventive use of force so far remains unanswered.”

This is a deliberate and nonsensical falsification. Under international law, a “preventive use of force” is indistinguishable from illegal aggression—a “war of choice” waged by a military power to eliminate some perceived future threat that would place it at a strategic disadvantage. At the Nuremberg trial of the Nazi leadership, such a war was described as the “supreme international crime.”

While the ex-defense chiefs’ report makes the case for NATO playing the role of a “global security provider,” independent of and, whenever necessary, in defiance of the United Nations and international law, much of the document consists of a worried critique of the present state of the Atlantic alliance.

It states, for example, that interventions in Bosnia, Kosovo, Afghanistan and Iraq have all been characterized by “the absence of a properly defined political objective, the absence of an integrated and allied strategy to achieve that objective, and the absence of capabilities to implement the strategy.”

It adds, “In addition, nations have commonly imposed too many national caveats on use of their forces. There exists an unwillingness on the part of nations to transfer authority to the operational commander once in the theatre of operations. Finally, there is a tendency for nations not to resource operations effectively.”

These statements appear to directly reflect the bitter divisions that have opened up between Washington and its NATO allies in Afghanistan, where the US has been forced to dispatch thousands more Marines because of the refusal of Germany, France and Italy to send more troops or waive restrictions on the rules of engagement for those they have already sent. At the same time, the European members have criticized the American military for excessive use of force, which they have blamed for the mounting resistance in the occupied country.

A section of the document proposes far-reaching changes to the NATO command structure in order to enable the military alliance “to respond at short notice and conduct operations at a high

operational tempo.”

These include changing from consensus decisions within NATO to majority votes in order to prevent dissent from blocking military interventions. The document also demands the scrapping of all “national caveats” limiting the use of European military forces, as in Afghanistan, placing them under a centralized and unrestricted NATO command.

The document calls for NATO to deny any say in its military operations to members of the alliance that do not contribute military forces to carry them out. It also explicitly advocates that NATO be prepared to carry out military action without United Nations Security Council authorization when “immediate action is needed to protect large numbers of human beings.”

In its conclusion, the document declares, “The lack of cooperation—indeed, at times, the rivalry—between the EU and NATO is something that must be rectified.” It insists, “For the USA to play its role as effectively as possible, the transatlantic bargain between the European countries, Canada and their American ally must be renewed.”

The reality is that the “transatlantic bargain” is coming unraveled as a result of the historic decline in the global position of US capitalism and the relentless turn by the American ruling elite towards militarism.

While the European bourgeoisie has repeatedly subordinated itself to Washington, including in the war against Iraq and the escalating threats against Iran, its interests and those of American capitalism do not coincide. The struggle between rival capitalist nations for “scarce resources”—which is the fundamental source of both of these conflicts—ultimately pits European capitalism against US imperialism.

Then there are China and Russia, which are increasingly asserting their own interests internationally. Significantly, just the day before the call for NATO preemptive nuclear strikes grabbed international headlines, the chief of staff of the Russian military issued his own similar warning.

“We do not intend to attack anyone, but we consider it necessary that all our partners in the international community clearly understand that for the defense of our sovereignty and the territorial integrity of Russia and its allies, the armed forces will be employed, including preventively the use of nuclear weapons,” said General Yuri Bauevsky.

It is the drive by US imperialism to offset its economic decline in relation to rivals in Europe and Asia by exploiting its military superiority to seize hold of vital natural resources and markets that poses the threat of a world conflagration. It is in this context that the recommendations of the former defense chiefs in relation to nuclear first strikes and wars of aggression assume their full menacing significance for the future of mankind.



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