

US defense secretary expands pre-emptive war doctrine to include nuclear strikes

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In a remarkable speech on nuclear policy delivered October 28 at the Carnegie Endowment for International Peace (CEIP), US Defense Secretary Robert Gates painted a dire portrait of international affairs and argued that Washington should expand the doctrine of pre-emptive war formulated by the Bush administration to include possible nuclear strikes.

It is widely rumored that, in the likely event that Democrat Barack Obama wins next week's US presidential election, Obama will keep Gates as defense secretary. Gates' speech, given in the waning days of the Bush presidency, has the character of a policy declaration of the next US administration.

Gates began by making extended and ominous parallels between the world situation today and that which prevailed at the founding of the Carnegie Institute in 1910, four years before the outbreak of World War I. At the time, he noted, Wall Street was passing through the panic of 1910-1911 and facing a credit crisis, the US had recently put down an insurgency in the Philippines at a cost of 4,200 American lives, comparable to today's US death toll in Iraq, and "Europe was arming itself to the teeth and forming a series of alliances whose implications were obvious to anyone who cared to look."

Gates argued that the pacifist illusions promoted by CEIP founder Andrew Carnegie—a US steel magnate at the turn of the 20th century, most famous in the working class movement for the brutal suppression of the 1892 Homestead strike against his company—should not deter Washington from planning broader war.

He noted, "In August of 1913, Carnegie said that 'the only measure required today for the maintenance of world peace is an agreement between three or four of the leading civilized powers... pledged to cooperate against disturbers of world peace.'" Gates pointed out that, writing four years later to President Woodrow Wilson, who had been elected in 1916 on a platform of keeping the US out of the

world war, "the same Andrew Carnegie encouraged the president in the strongest terms to declare war, because, he wrote, 'There is only one straight way of settlement.'"

Turning to US nuclear policy, Gates said, "As long as others have nuclear weapons, we must maintain some level of these weapons ourselves: to deter potential adversaries, and to reassure over two dozen allies and partners who rely on our nuclear umbrella for their security—making it unnecessary for them to develop their own."

This comment gives a sense of the highly tense and unstable character of international relations, and the paranoia of US officials. Gates' fears about the spread of nuclear weapons are not limited to existing programs of "potential adversaries," among which Gates included "rogue states such as North Korea and Iran, or Russian or Chinese strategic modernization programs." His fears extend to the nuclear policy of all states, including current US allies.

Gates later repeated this point: "We simply cannot predict the future. [...] our adversaries and other nations will always seek whatever advantages they can find. Knowing that, we have to be prepared for contingencies we haven't even considered."

Gates' list of US-friendly states that have chosen not to develop nuclear weapons was significant: South Korea, Taiwan, Brazil, Argentina, South Africa, and Libya. Two of the most obvious such countries—ex-World War II enemies Japan and Germany—were not included. Gates did not explain what political factors induced him to omit them.

Gates then issued a remarkable threat: "As long as other states have or seek nuclear weapons—and can potentially threaten us, our allies and friends—then we must have a deterrent capacity that makes it clear that challenging the US in the nuclear arena—or with other weapons of mass destruction—could result in an overwhelming, catastrophic

response."

According to Gates, the US must be able to credibly threaten a nuclear holocaust against any state that "challenges" the US in the nuclear arena or with other "weapons of mass destruction." By his own words, such a challenge does not require a nation to threaten to attack the US. It does not even require that a nation possess nuclear weapons or other WMD. It is enough for a nation merely to "seek" such weapons for it to become a potential target for a preemptive "overwhelming, catastrophic response" from the United States.

Such a doctrine has immense implications not only for US nuclear weapons programs, but for the totality of US foreign policy. It stipulates that every foreign power in the world must believe that attempting to develop nuclear weapons invites US nuclear attack. Thus, the US would arguably be obliged to attack with nuclear weapons countries which it accused of developing nuclear weapons—such as Iran and North Korea—lest the rest of the world conclude that the US will not carry out its threats.

Gates is filling out the Bush doctrine of pre-emptive war—announced in advance of the unprovoked invasion of Iraq based on lies about supposed Iraqi weapons of mass destruction—with the proviso that a US first-strike can involve the large-scale use of nuclear weapons.

In his speech, he called for a substantial increase in nuclear weapons spending, including the possible resumption of nuclear weapons testing. "There is absolutely no way we can maintain a credible deterrent and reduce the number of weapons in our stockpile without either resorting to testing our stockpile or pursuing a modernization program," he declared.

Citing a "bleak" prognosis for overcoming technical and staffing problems of US strategic nuclear weapons programs, Gates explained that his policies involved the largest and most powerful US weapons: "The program we propose is not about new capabilities—suitcase bombs or bunker-busters or tactical nukes. [...] It is about the future credibility of our strategic deterrent."

Gates also addressed concerns about the command structure of the US Air Force's nuclear forces, sparked by his June 5 sackings of several top Air Force officials after it was discovered that US nuclear missile parts had been shipped to Taiwan. At the time, the World Socialist Web Site raised the question of whether the shipment to Taiwan had been part of an unofficial foreign policy carried out by rogue sections of the US military. However, the bourgeois press accepted official explanations that this had been a simple technical

oversight.

But Gates' proposals centered not on fixing technical problems with Air Force shipping protocols, but rather on controlling Air Force policy. He announced measures to centralize "nuclear policy and oversight," including a new headquarters office at the Air Staff and a Nuclear Weapons Center at Kirtland Air Force Base, which is to be tasked with "clearing up ambiguous chains of command that have created problems in the past."

Gates closed by listing several types of attack that the US might use "deterrence," nuclear or otherwise, to prevent. He spoke of developing "appropriate" responses to cyber-attacks on US computer systems, to deterring attacks on US communications satellites (which could be carried out only by countries with technologically advanced militaries) and of developing "new technologies to identify the forensic signature" of nuclear material, which would allow the US to "hold any state, terrorist group, or other non-state actor or individual fully accountable for supporting or enabling terrorist efforts to obtain or use weapons of mass destruction."

It should be pointed out that several of these types of attack—especially cyber-attack and terrorist attacks with weapons of mass destruction—are by their nature difficult to track, and leave open the possibility of manipulation by Washington. This is perhaps best shown by the 2001 anthrax attacks, which were carried out using spores from a US Army lab at Fort Detrick and ultimately blamed on a US civilian scientist working at Fort Detrick, but which the media long blamed on Muslim terrorists.

In assessing the significance of Gates' remarkably bellicose comments, it should be noted that Gates' justification of pre-emptive nuclear war is not isolated. In April, then-Democratic presidential candidate Hillary Clinton said that if Iran attacked Israel, the US would respond by "obliterating" Iran. These comments are further evidence that the US ruling class will pursue an even more aggressive foreign policy after the 2008 elections than before.



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