

Reality Behind the Smoke-Screen

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Early this year, the Bush administration completed the required Nuclear Posture Review (NPR) that sets the policy outlines for determining the “requirements” for the US nuclear forces over the next 5 to 10 years. Like other reviews, the 2002 NPR was and is a secret document. But occasionally there are leaks and the public does get to know what happens behind locked doors. On March 10, the *Los Angeles Times* published an article by Bill Arkin, a respected defence analyst, that revealed that the NPR “has ordered the Pentagon to draft contingency plans for the use of nuclear weapons against at least seven countries, naming not only Russia and the ‘axis of evil’ – Iraq, Iran, and North Korea – but also China, Libya and Syria.” The Pentagon is also “to develop plans for using nuclear weapons to retaliate against chemical or biological attacks, as well as ‘surprising military developments’ of an unspecified nature.”

This revelation has come in for widespread criticism. China’s Vice Foreign Minister Li Zhaoxing, for example, accused Washington of “nuclear blackmail”. And on the non-governmental side, the global council of Abolition 2000, a global network to eliminate nuclear weapons involving over 2000 citizen groups in more than 90 countries (www.abolition2000.org) described the policy as “insane, immoral and illegal.” The NPR has come for criticism within South Asia as well. The Indian Coalition for Nuclear Disarmament and Peace, for example, voiced “its outrage at the unprecedented nuclear

threat to the whole world held out [by] the militarists at the helm of the United States of America.”

There is, however, another possible reaction to the revelation and that is to ask: what is new? In a sense, there is no reason to be surprised that the US Pentagon has plans to drop nuclear weapons in its pet list of “evil countries”. The fact of the matter is simple. Nuclear weapons are made to be used, sooner or later. But as the experience in Hiroshima and Nagasaki showed us, nuclear weapons are instruments of mass murder and destruction. It is because pro-nuclear advocates do not want to admit to this mass murder that they claim that nuclear weapons are not meant to be used, that they are for “deterrence” and so on. Deterrence is said to follow from the “mutually assured destruction” that would result from the use of nuclear weapons by one nuclear armed country against the other.

As an aside, it is worth pointing out that the language employed by nuclear strategists is deliberately intended to camouflage the underlying reality. As Fred C. Ikle, who went on to be the US Undersecretary of Defense during the Reagan administration, once admitted, “Assured Destruction fails to indicate what is to be destroyed; but then ‘assured genocide’ would reveal the truth too starkly...keeping ready arsenals for instant and unrestrained slaughter of men, women and children is likely to impose a wrenching perspective on the officialdom of both nations.”

Despite the proclaimed belief in deterrence, all countries possessing nuclear weapons implicitly admit to the possibility that deterrence could fail. This is why they make plans for using nuclear weapons. As British historian E. P. Thompson noted, “It has never been true that nuclear war is ‘unthinkable’. It has been thought and the thought has

been put into effect.” The results of this putting into effect are documents like the NPR. Hence it is that there is really nothing very surprising about the NPR.

Having argued that the fact that the recent NPR contemplates the use of nuclear weapons is nothing to be really surprised at, it must be added that there are several things to be *concerned* about in the review. What the NPR does is make nuclear weapons *more useable*, and the threat of such use more credible. This is through two means: by postulating circumstances that are argued to require the use of nuclear weapons (for example, to destroy hardened underground command posts) and by calling for the development of low yield “mini-nukes” that US leaders think can be used without too much public opposition. Further, as the Western States Legal Foundation (a grassroots group in California, USA, that works for the abolition of nuclear weapons) points out, the NPR “relocates nuclear weapons within a broad spectrum of warfighting capabilities”, something that has become more feasible with the enormously accurate conventional weapons that the US now possesses.

All this makes for a more dangerous world dominated by a sole superpower that is all too trigger happy. The publicity given to the NPR is to be welcomed since it clearly exposes the violent basis, and the threat of greater violence, upon which the US hopes to continue this dominance. Nothing could possibly justify such threats and therefore no rationalizations should be accepted. It would be suicidal to try and deal with this challenge through military means. What it demands a collective response from the peoples of the world saying that they refuse to live by such rules, that they refuse to offer their consent to a world that is threatened with nuclear annihilation by a few countries.