

De-linking CBW from Nuclear Deterrence

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Summary

President Obama's Nuclear Posture Review¹ has raised hopes of universally fine-tuning nuclear deterrence; using it 'fundamentally' against the nuclear threats. This article attempts to underline the issues involved in de-linking Chemical and Biological weapons' threats from nuclear use.

The US Nuclear Posture Review

The Nuclear Posture Review (NPR) is a policy document of the US Department of Defense that underlines the role of nuclear weapons in the country's overall security strategy. It basically seeks to establish "U.S. nuclear policy, strategy, capabilities and force posture for the next five to ten years".² The NPR is a unilateral declaration and the opinion on whether it actually influences the nuclear behaviour of other states is sharply divided. However, since the operationalisation of nuclear forces is informed by this strategic postulation, it becomes significant.

The NPR process was started in 1994 and in April this year President Obama brought out his first and United States' third Nuclear Posture Review. President Obama has been stressing at minimizing the role of nuclear weapons in US' security strategy. This, as he affirmed in his famous Prague speech on nuclear disarmament, would act as a precursor to rendering nuclear weapons useless, leading to their eventual elimination.³ Hence, the release of the NPR-2010 was preceded by high expectations from the disarmament and nonproliferation lobbies on the one side and deep apprehension regarding dilution of security priorities among the security community on the other hand. Not surprisingly, it took 150 meetings, several delays and Obama's own interventions to guide the process and satisfy all the stakeholders.

And the final document, released on 06 April 2010, does lay out a transformed role for US nuclear weapons. The NPR essentially aims at enhancing security of the US through strengthening the international nonproliferation regime.⁴ The NPR tries to minimize the possible conditions in which nuclear weapons could be used. The NPR calls for a moratorium on developing new nuclear weapons, assures the Non Nuclear Weapons States (NNWS) compliant with the NPT about not using nukes against them, and precludes using nuclear weapons against a chemical or biological weapons or even massive cyber attacks. This recapitulation of priorities is seen as recognition of a global scenario in

which terrorism and ‘rogue’ states are bigger challenges than cold war style state rivalries.⁵ Discussing the NPR in an interview, President Obama said “We are going to want to make sure that we can continue to move towards less emphasis on nuclear weapons...and to make sure that our conventional weapons capability is an effective deterrent in all but the most extreme circumstances.”⁶ This is definitely a perceptible departure from Bush administration’s policy charted out in the NPR of 2002 that enhanced the role of nuclear weapons by envisaging their use against a large number of potential threats conventional attacks of large scale.

CBW Weapons and Nuclear Deterrence

The pertinence of the role of using nuclear weapons against chemical or biological attacks was under discussion for a long time. Since the C&B weapons are already banned and there are multilateral mechanisms to deal with violations through the UN Security Council, the US unilateralism of linking nuclear deterrence to Chemical and Biological threats was deemed unwarranted. However, in the December 2002 “National Strategy to Combat Weapons of Mass Destruction,” the Bush administration stated that the US reserves the right to retaliate with overwhelming force, including nuclear weapons, in case of a CBW attack.⁷ On the operational side, the option to use nuclear weapons to destroy identified enemy stockpiles of chemical or biological weapons was included in the draft “Doctrine for Joint Nuclear Operations” of The Joint Chiefs of Staff in 2005.⁸

China in its Unilateral Security Assurance of 1978, was the first state to come up with a comprehensive no-first-use policy affirming “at no time and in no circumstances it will be the first to use nuclear weapons”.⁹ This obviously means CBW threats are de-linked from nuclear deterrence in China’s policy. In Russia’s case, it has a clear declaration about using nuclear weapons in response to a WMD attack against or a major conventional attack against itself or its allies.¹⁰ Pakistan’s stance on using nuclear weapons is perhaps most amorphous in the

world. It has no stated nuclear doctrine but it has linked its nuclear posture to India and its military leaders have been evoking nuclear threats even in case of water disputes.¹¹

India has a declared no-first-use policy on nuclear weapons under its nuclear doctrine adopted in August 1999.¹² However, in the pronouncements in the wake of establishment of the Strategic Force Command (SFC) in 2003, India practically revised this stance by allowing for the use of nuclear weapons in response to a biological or chemical attack. It added a phrase saying “.....in the event of a major attack against India, or Indian forces anywhere, by biological or chemical weapons, India will retain the option of retaliating with nuclear weapons.”¹³ This revision in India’s nuclear doctrine is also seen as diluting the NFU stance against the NNWS.¹⁴ India has been demanding a universal No-First-Use treaty. This demand found place in its 7-point agenda submitted to UN Conference on Disarmament in 2008.¹⁵ However, this can be meaningfully done only with de-linking chemical and biological weapons from nuclear deterrence.

Scholars have been arguing that clubbing CBW weapons with nuclear weapons under the rubric of ‘Weapons of Mass Destruction’ is misleading.¹⁶ The major justification provided for linking nuclear deterrence to CBW threat is that in case of a CBW attack, states can not retaliate in kind, as Chemical and Biological Weapons have been outlawed. However, a close scrutiny would suggest that the supposed role of nuclear weapons in CBW deterrence goes against nonproliferation imperatives. Whether nuclear weapons can deter chemical or biological threats has also been under question. Contrary to the credo of nuclear proliferation optimists, the experts on Chemical and Biological Arms Control have held that pushing nuclear weapons to the background would actually help in making chemical or biological weapon programs less attractive.¹⁷ The International Commission on Nuclear Non-proliferation and Disarmament (ICNND)’s “Draft Treaty on Non-First use of Nuclear Weapons” also in its introduction asserts that No-First-Use doctrines, with stated non-use against CBW threats “would give less motivation for other

states to develop nuclear –or for that matter chemical or biological–weapons capabilities of their own”.¹⁸ Moreover, to actually reduce the danger of chemical weapons, meeting the extended deadline of 2012 for destroying chemical weapons stockpiles, universalizing the CWC, strengthening the Organisation for the Prohibition of Chemical Weapons (OPCW) are much urgent needs than a hollow threat of nuclear weapons. Nuclear weapons have not been used since 1945 and there a great deal of political taboo and extremely complex strategic calculations would be involved in actually using nuclear weapons. Therefore, nuclear threat is not likely to be an effective deterrent for chemical weapons anyways.

De-emphasizing the role of nuclear weapons in dealing with CBW threats did not come to Obama’s Nuclear Posture Review only because of some exigent imperative of disarmament politics. In the process of drafting of the Nuclear Posture Review, the Nuclear Weapons Complex Consolidation (NWCC) Policy Network’s recommendation for a new strategic posture highlighted the need of eliminating any reference to the sue of nuclear weapons in retaliation to CBW attacks, holding that “military means other than the threat of nuclear preemption or retaliation can and must suffice to address these lesser threats.”¹⁹ the report went further in its recommendations and underlined that the new US Posture review should “forego integrating the potential use of nuclear weapons with strategies for use of conventional force” and mandate nuclear weapons to be used only against nuclear attacks or threats.

Defining the “Sole Purpose” of Nuclear Weapons

With chemical and nuclear weapons already internationally banned, the only real possibility of their use is by malicious non-state actors. And when it comes to non-state actors, nuclear weapons do not provide any credible deterrence promise against them.²⁰ Moreover, in case of CBW weapons, the forensics to determine the source of such attacks is an extremely complex process and identifying the state harbouring or commanding the terrorists will always be

disputable. This will blunt the possibility of retaliatory strike. The best ways to reduce CBW terrorist threats have been identified as – intelligence collection and analysis, control spread of precursor chemical or biological agents, reducing vulnerability of high-profile targets, strengthening biosecurity measures including management of consequences of CBW attack, increased security at chemicals and biological plants and research centres and enhanced international co-operation.²¹ Experts, including the ICNND Report on Non-proliferation and Disarmament strongly recommend strengthening of compliance mechanism of the Chemical Weapons Convention and Biological and Toxin Weapons Convention, while making retaliation against nuclear attacks “sole purpose” of nuclear weapons.²² Hence, there is a strong case for de-linking chemical and biological weapons from nuclear deterrence doctrines. This will make no-first-use policies meaningful and further contribute to de-valuing nuclear weapons, an essential step towards a world free of nuclear weapons.

The de-linking of nuclear deterrence from Chemical or Biological weapon threats in the US nuclear posture review is a welcome step. However, since the process of getting individual states to adopt a national No-First-Use policy and non-use against CBW weapons will be cumbersome and the existing trust-deficit in international system will make it extremely untenuous, this can practically happen only through some universal agreement. This can be meaningfully done only through some legally binding international instrument.

Assigning lesser roles for nuclear weapons would eventually help in reducing the role of deterrence that triggers arms race and encourages proliferation. De-linking nukes from CBW threats is an important step in that direction. An international no-first-use treaty with explicit de-linking of CBW threats is an urgent imperative.

Endnotes:

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