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Nuke 'em!

Updated on 3/11/2002 1:41:09 PM

A report in the Los Angeles Times reveals that the Bush administration, in a secret policy review completed early this year, has ordered the Pentagon to draft contingency plans for the use of nuclear weapons against at least seven countries.

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The countries in question include not only old cold war enemies such as Russia, China and North Korea, but also Iraq, Iran, Libya and Syria.

The Nuclear Posture Review (NPR) as the secret document is called, was delivered to Congress on January 8.

The report details three scenarios in which nuclear weapons could be used: against targets able to withstand non-nuclear attack; in retaliation for an attack with nuclear, biological or chemical weapons; or in the event of "surprising military developments", a formulation that the NPR fails to explain. The NPR also asks the Pentagon to prepare for the possibility that nuclear weapons may be required in some future Arab-Israeli crisis.

It includes calls for developing bunker-busting mini-nukes and nuclear weapons that reduce collateral damage.

The document reveals evolving thinking in the Defence Department.

While downgrading the threat from Russia and publicly emphasizing a commitment to the reduction of the number of long-range nuclear weapons, Defence Department strategists seek to promote tactical and so-called "adaptive" nuclear capabilities to deal with contingencies where large nuclear arsenals are not required.

The call for developing new nuclear weapons that reduce 'collateral damage' is the most myopic of all, ignoring as it does the uncontrollable fallout of these weapons of mass slaughter, and their political, moral and military implications.

The scenarios the Pentagon planners are asked to envisage are in the nature of what the PR calls "immediate, potential or unexpected" contingencies.

North Korea, Iraq, Iran, Syria and Libya are named as countries that could be involved in all three kinds of threat.

According to the NPR's view, all these countries have long-standing hostility towards the US and its security partners, all sponsor or harbour terrorists, and have active weapons of mass destruction and missile programmes.

China, because of its nuclear forces and developing strategic objectives, is listed as a country that could be involved in the immediate or potential contingency, for example a war between China and Taiwan.

A North Korean attack on South Korea or an Iraqi attack on Israel or any of its neighbours are other scenarios for which the NPR requires making nuclear weapons a tool for fighting a war, rather than deterring one.

The strategic thinking contained in the NPR dispenses with the long-standing doctrine that saw nuclear weapons more as a deterrent, or at worst as weapons of last resort.

It will not be lost on the countries named as potential targets or for that matter the world at large that the NPR represents a doctrinal escalation in the development, deployment and use of nuclear weapons.

Nor is memory so short that the US's use of atomic weapons on Hiroshima and Nagasaki at the end of World War II can be forgotten.

The US enjoys the dubious honour of being the only country to have actually used nuclear weapons in a conflict.

It does not therefore surprise one to learn from the recently released Nixon archives that the former US President contemplated using nuclear weapons in the Vietnam war.

Aggressive militarism, including a Dr Strangelove kind of dementia, characterizes the US posture in modern times.

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Given the impermissibility by any canons of war, peace, morality or humanity of the use of nuclear weapons, it is alarming in the extreme that the arrogance of Washington since the comparatively easy victory over the Taliban and Al-Qaeda in Afghanistan has so emboldened the hawks in the American establishment that they have thrown all restraint and caution to the winds and are talking about this kind of insanity.

The world is a much more dangerous place as a result of the US ascending to the position of sole superpower.

It will require the will and united efforts of the rest of humanity to put a brake on its descent into unacceptable threatened mayhem globally.

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