Dr Strangelove Rides Again: US Nuclear War Fighting Policy

The US Joint Chiefs of Staff published their Nuclear Operations document online, only to remove it in short order. Fortunately enough, those seeking confirmation of the US military’s doctrine can access the full document via the Federation of American Scientists.

The significance of the document is two-fold. This is the first such publication in fourteen years. As such, we have not had access to a full throated exposition of how the US military establishment thinks nuclear weapons could or should be ‘used’. It is also significant because the details of the document correspond to the very worst assessments from policy watchers, analysts and nuclear disancers.

The document confirms a clear shift from viewing nuclear weapons as a mere ‘deterrence’, towards considering them as a means by which to actively fight a war.

Chapter V of the document, titled ‘Nuclear Operations’, opens with a quote from Sun Tzu’s The Art of War. This is a not-too-subtle framing of what is to come. Section 1a reasserts the place of nuclear weapons in “national defense”, then clearly defines “Nuclear operations” as follows: “activities within the range of military operations, to include deterrence, crisis response, strike, assessment, and return to stability.”

Section 2a describes the “primary purpose” of the nuclear triad as being “deterring attack on the US homeland and our allies and partners.” So far, so familiar. Then we have this, from section 3e:

“Employment of nuclear weapons can radically alter or accelerate the course of a campaign. A nuclear weapon could be...

Continued on page 3

Iran: 10 Minutes From Disaster

On Thursday 20 June, US President Donald Trump issued the order to commence a military attack against Iran. The order came after days of mounting tension, including the shooting down of a US military drone over Iranian airspace and attacks on oil tankers. With ten minutes to spare, Trump called off the attack.

The intended targets of the attack are reported to have included Iranian radar and missile installations. War planes were in the air and US Naval ships were in position.

Whatever the actual reasons for Trump calling off the attack, we should be thankful that he did. However accurately missiles might be targeted, however carefully the locations and of the nuclear triad as being “deterring attack on the US homeland and our allies and partners.” So far, so familiar. Then we have this, from section 3e:

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Continued on page 3
Iran Alert

A meeting of the Joint Commission of the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA) took place in Vienna on 28 June 2019. The Joint Commission was chaired on behalf of the EU High Representative Federica Mogherini by EEAS Secretary General Helga Schmid and was attended by the E3+2 (China, France, Germany, Russia, United Kingdom) and Iran.

The meeting was called with the intention of ensuring the continued implementation of the JCPOA in all its aspects and discuss ways to tackle challenges arising from the withdrawal and re-imposition of sanctions by the United States on Iran, as well as recent announcements by Iran regarding the implementation of its nuclear commitments.

The Bertrand Russell Peace Foundation drafted the following text which was sent to the meeting of the Joint Commission, urging the parties to continue their vital work despite US withdrawal from the JCPOA.

The following excerpts are from the report of the Joint Commission meeting issued by the European External Action Service.

“JCPOA remains a key element of the global nuclear non-proliferation architecture ... Furthermore, in light of the recent tensions, its preservation continues to be essential for the regional stability and security.

In view of recent concerning statements and developments, participants recalled the key importance of continued full and effective implementation of the agreement by all sides. At the same time, participants recalled that the lifting of sanctions is an essential part of the agreement and reviewed their respective commitments in this regard...

As part of the ongoing work on sanctions and nuclear issues, the Joint Commission tasked experts to look into practical solutions in particular for the export of low enriched uranium ... In parallel, they will also continue to intensify efforts as regards sanctions lifting by convening specialised and focused expert discussions in line with the commitments ... aimed at providing practical solutions in order to maintain the normalisation of trade and economic relations with Iran...

Participants agreed to keep JCPOA implementation under close review and it was decided to convene the Joint Commission at ministerial level in the near future.”

Viena, Austria
28/06/2019 – Press releases
Continued from page 1

...brought into the campaign as a result of perceived failure in a conventional campaign, potential loss of control or regime, or to escalate the conflict to sue for peace on more-favourable terms...

Perhaps more disturbing than the opening quote from Chapter V is the one chosen for Chapter III. This chapter, titled ‘Planning and Targeting’ opens with the words of Herman Kahn. Kahn argued that a nuclear war could be ‘winnable’ and is thought to have inspired Stanley Kubrick’s film Dr Strangelove.

Here’s what Kahn has to say: “My guess is that nuclear weapons will be used sometime in the next hundred years, but that their use is likely to be small and limited rather than widespread and unconstrained.” The authors of this report apparently take Kahn seriously, as the remainder of Chapter III amounts to a guide for anyone considering unleashing nuclear annihilation.

Section 4a announces that: “Integration of nuclear weapons into a theater of operations requires the consideration of multiple variables”. When opponents of nuclear weapons consider the variables involved, we almost always focus on the prospect that hundreds of thousands of lives will be extinguished. We might consider the environmental chaos that will ensue. We worry about the prospect of omnicide - the final destruction of all life on Earth.

Section 4 of Chapter 3 focuses on other variables, exclusively related to securing victory. The document alights on ‘Yield Selection’ as the primary variable; how big a bomb should be used. Variable two is ‘Height of Burst’ because this ‘enables [nuclear war] planners to take advantage of the incident blast wave’. Variable three is ‘Fallout’, which will no doubt impact the ability of ground forces to advance. Variable five, ‘Weapons System Selection’, boasts of the ‘multiple capabilities’ of the US nuclear arsenal.

Variable five, ‘Law of War’, assures us that “attacks using nuclear weapons must not be conducted when the expected incidental harm to civilians is excessive compared to the military advantage expected to be gained” [emphasis added].

Steven Aftergood, who directs the government secrecy project at the Federation of American Scientists told the Guardian newspaper that the document is “very much conceived as a war-fighting doctrine - not simply deterrence doctrine, and that’s unsettling … that kind of thinking itself can be hazardous. It can make that sort of eventuality more likely”.

The publication of this doctrine in the wake of Trump’s Nuclear Posture Review, National Security Strategy, his wrecking of the Intermediate-range Nuclear Forces Treaty and the ‘Iran Deal’ points in a very worrying direction. The peace, anti-war and disarmament movements need to be alert to further developments and need to develop a strategy to pull the world back from the worst. Tensions are high and the risks are mounting.

**International Meeting**

**NUCLEAR SECURITY IN EUROPE AFTER THE COLLAPSE OF THE INF TREATY**

September 14th, 2019 Brussels

11am to 5pm at De Markten

Oude Graanmarkt 5, 1000 Brussels, Belgium

Tensions are growing among states possessing nuclear weapons and the collapse of the Intermediate-range Nuclear Forces (INF) Treaty brings Europe closer to the brink of another dangerous Cold War. Meanwhile, the UN Treaty on the Prohibition of Nuclear Weapons (TPNW) gains traction and opens new avenues for urgently needed common campaigns and actions. How do we stop this nuclear arms race? How best to promote and implement the Treaty on the Prohibition of Nuclear Weapons? What alternatives are there for peace and common/human security in Europe? How can we achieve European Nuclear Disarmament? Please save the date and if you are interested in attending, please send a note to info@ipb.org.

Feel free to share this invitation!


With the support of TRANSFORM & Belgian Coalition Against Nuclear Weapons
Bonfire of the Treaties

In 2016, there were fourteen people working in the US State Department office tasked with negotiating and implementing nuclear deals. As of July 2019, that number has slumped to four. Given the US wrecking operations against the Intermediate-range Nuclear Forces Treaty and ‘Iran Deal’, you could argue that there’s a great deal less work to do.

The fate of staff at the Office of Strategic Stability and Deterrence Affairs is just one indication of the extent to which the US has moved away from supporting multilateral arms control and deterrence regimes, towards unilateral withdrawal from such efforts. Diplomacy has been replaced with sanctions. Negotiation has been replaced with ‘spin’ about President Trump’s ‘deal making’ abilities. Cooperation has been replaced with threats of war.

Following the sabotage of the INF and JCPOA, the US now looks set to undermine the New START agreement that exists between itself and Russia. This agreement functions to limit the number of strategic nuclear warheads in each country. The US wishes to ‘look again’ and perhaps even negotiate a new deal including China. This script has been used before.

Negotiations to extend the life of the New START agreement are due to take place soon, with Russian President Putin warning that “If we do not begin talks now, it would be over because there would be no time even for formalities”.

The agreement is due to expire in 2021, and if no extension is agreed then the steady reduction in warheads could quickly be reversed.

Of additional concern are reports that Trump’s National Security Advisor, John Bolton, is arguing for the US to rescind the 1996 Comprehensive Test Ban Treaty. This Treaty was signed by President Bill Clinton but was not passed in Congress due to opposition from the Republicans.

The fate of the Office of Strategic Stability and Deterrence Affairs indicates not only the direction of travel of the current US administration but is a major attack on the capacity of the US to seriously engage in future negotiations. The OSSDA is not only an administrative organisation but a repository of knowledge, skill and commitment to arms control. This has now been dispersed if not yet completely destroyed.

President Trump has already started his re-election campaign and a second term is not out of the question. What will be left of international arms control if his Presidency persists for another five years? The picture is bleak. How will other nuclear-armed states react to US actions? The ‘logic’ of nuclear arms suggests that they will accumulate more of them and put them at a more aggressive posture. What of the non-nuclear-armed states who feel their security is undermined by such developments. Again, the ‘logic’ suggests they will attempt to acquire them. This is, of course, all completely illogical.

The decision of the other signatories to the JCPOA to attempt to preserve as much of the functioning as possible of the ‘Iran Deal’, despite major obstacles, indicates one perfectly reasonable response to the ‘bonfire of the Treaties’. Another would be for nuclear-armed and non-nuclear-armed states not already covered by Nuclear-Weapon-Free Zones to start seriously asserting themselves in working towards such a goal. The pressure for such moves will come from concerted efforts by movements, political parties and others to ‘break free’ from the US’s nuclear strangle hold and to disavow the nuclear road.