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US Still Preparing for Nuclear War

By Lawrence Wittner

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Nearly a quarter century after the disappearance of the Soviet Union and the end of the Cold War, the U.S. government is still getting ready for nuclear war.

This fact was underscored on June 19, 2013, when the Pentagon, on behalf of President Barack Obama, released a report to Congress outlining what it called the U.S. government's "Nuclear Employment Strategy." Although the report indicated some minor alterations in U.S. policy, it exhibited far more continuity than change.

In 2010, the administration's Nuclear Posture Review declared that it would work toward making deterrence of nuclear attack the "sole purpose" of U.S. nuclear weapons. The 2013 report, however, without any explanation, reported that "we cannot adopt such a policy today." Thus, as in the past, the U.S. government considers itself free to initiate a nuclear attack on other nations.

In addition, the 2013 "Nuclear Employment Strategy" continued U.S. government reliance on a "nuclear triad" of ground-launched intercontinental ballistic missiles, submarine-launched intercontinental ballistic missiles, and bomber-launched nuclear weapons. Although the need for one or more legs of this "triad" has been debated since the early 1990s, the 2013 report concluded that "retaining all three triad legs will best maintain strategic stability."

The 2013 “Nuclear Employment Strategy” also retained another controversial aspect of U.S. nuclear policy: counterforce strategy. Designed to employ U.S. nuclear weapons to destroy an enemy nation’s nuclear weapons, delivery systems, and associated installations, counterforce is potentially very destabilizing, for it provides an incentive to nations caught up in a crisis to knock out the opponent’s nuclear weapons before they can be used. And this, in turn, means that nations are more likely to initiate nuclear war and to desire large numbers of nuclear weapons to avoid having their weapons totally destroyed by a preemptive attack. Consequently, as Hans Kristensen of the Federation of American Scientists has noted, the report’s emphasis on counterforce “undercuts efforts to reduce the role and numbers of nuclear weapons.”

Furthermore, despite a growing desire among Western nations to have the U.S. government remove an estimated 200 nuclear-armed B61 gravity bombs – weapons dating back to the 1960s – deployed in Belgium, Germany, Italy, the Netherlands, and Turkey, the Pentagon report made no proposal along these lines. These Cold War relics, too, remain untouchable.

One shift in emphasis indicated in the “Nuclear Employment Strategy” is a presidential directive to Pentagon officials to “reduce the role of ‘launch under attack.’” Currently, it is U.S. policy to fire nuclear weapons at an opponent on short notice if there are signs that a nuclear strike is under way against the United States or its allies. But this reduction in the likelihood of sliding into a full-scale nuclear war would be more reassuring if the President’s directive did not also command the Pentagon to retain a launch-under-attack capability, in case the President decided to use it.

But what about Obama’s lofty rhetoric of April 2009, in Prague, where he stated that the U.S. government was committed to building a nuclear-weapons-free world? Also, didn’t he renew that approach in his Berlin speech of June 19, 2013, only hours before the issuance of the Pentagon’s “Nuclear Employment Strategy,” when he called for nuclear disarmament negotiations with the Russians?

Yes, the rhetoric of 2009 was very inspiring, landing Obama a Nobel Peace Prize and raising hopes around the world that the nuclear menace was on the verge of extinction. But fairly little came of it, with the modest exception of the New START Treaty with Russia.

The Berlin speech, too, was substantially over-rated. Although many media reports implied that Obama had proposed decreasing the Russian and American nuclear arsenals by a third, the reality was that the President suggested his readiness to support a reduction of “up to” a third of *deployed* Russian and American *strategic* nuclear weapons. Under the New START Treaty, the limit to the number of these kinds of weapons in each nation is 1,550. Thus, in reality, Obama announced that he favored an agreement for each nation to eliminate 1 to 517 of them. From the standpoint of nuclear disarmers, that reduction would certainly be welcome – if, in the face of Republican resistance, it is ever consummated. But, it should be noted that, at present, the U.S. government possesses approximately 7,700 nuclear weapons.

Another indication that the Obama administration is in no hurry to fulfill its promises about building a nuclear weapons-free world is found in its fiscal 2014 budget proposal to Congress. Here, amid sharp cuts for a broad variety of programs, there is a proposed 9 percent increase in

federal funding for the Energy Department's U.S. nuclear weapons activities, including upgrading nuclear warheads (like the B61 gravity bomb, slated for a \$10 billion makeover) and modernizing nuclear weapons production facilities.

This administration unwillingness to discard the immensely dangerous, outdated nuclear policies of the past flies in the face of public support for abolishing nuclear weapons, whether expressed in public opinion polls or in the resolutions of mainstream bodies like the National Council of Churches and the U.S. Conference of Mayors. But, unless there is a substantial public mobilization to end the American government's reliance on nuclear war, it seems likely that U.S. officials will continue to prepare for it.