



“Prompt Global Strike” A New US Strategy Takes Shape

by Karl-Heinz Kamp

At the end of September 2006, a new US military command with the cryptic title “Joint Functional Component Command for Space and Global Strike” is scheduled to become operational. In addition, the Pentagon announced months ago that some of the Trident missiles deployed on American nuclear submarines should be equipped with conventional rather than nuclear warheads.

These seemingly intra-military or purely technical decisions of little political importance reveal themselves upon closer analysis to be evidence of America’s long-term modifications in nuclear strategy. Instead of relying on nuclear weapons to subsequently punish an attack on the US, as had been the strategy in the past, the new plan calls for the precautionary destruction of the means of attack with the help of conventional weaponry. At the core of the new strategy is the concept of “Prompt Global Strikes”, the aim of which is to have the capacity to destroy nearly any target worldwide in very little time. What are the causes and consequences of this change in strategy, hardly taken note of in Europe? What problems might develop and where might transatlantic consultation be advisable?

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1. Background of the "Prompt Global Strikes"

It had become clear to American strategic planners long before the terrorist acts of September 11, 2001 that the Cold War idea of nuclear deterrence, resting on the concept of ensured mutual assured destruction, had lost validity in the wake of the end of the East-West confrontation. The new world order involved, rather than a single, supposedly predictable opponent, a multiplicity of unpredictable adversaries comprised of both state and non-state actors. In some cases it would be possible to rely on the classical mechanisms of deterrence as before. Other threats, such as that posed by Islamist suicide bombers, clearly called for fundamentally different strategies of deterrence and defense. In fighting irresponsible governments, non-state actors or Jihadist terrorists, a threat of nuclear retaliation can hardly be regarded as credible given the willingness of these individuals to accept their own death as a consequence of their actions.

The USA responded to the change in threat in two ways. For one, the Bush administration has mitigated the role of nuclear weapons in American security policy continuously since 2001, despite the popular accusations to the contrary. Some missions that in the past would have relied on nuclear weapons should in the future be conducted by conventional means.

The other response was the idea of "Prompt Global Strikes", debuting in 2001 and since then progressively implemented. The goal of this concept is to be able to destroy any target on the globe, from production facilities for weapons of mass destruction (WMD), to missile bases, command posts or terrorist camps, within a very brief period of time (from minutes to a few hours).

Conceptually this amounts to a shift in the deterrence logic of the Cold War, when the dissuasive effect came from the threat of unacceptable damage through nuclear destruction: the danger of atomic retaliation was thought to affect the (rationally calculating) aggressor and prevent him from attacking. In the future, aggressors whose cost-benefit calculations cannot be changed through the threat of retaliation should be thwarted by an early destruction of their military capabilities. The option of nuclear retaliation will remain, but it will be complemented by the element of offensive "circumvention" with the help of conventional weapons. According to the American National Security Strategy of September 2002, in which the necessity of "preemptive strikes" was greatly emphasized, this circumventive approach could also be used preventatively.

The demands of such a massive change in strategy from defensive to offensive are extremely ambitious. Not only will appropriate weapons systems, able to be launched worldwide in mere minutes and destroy hardened and deeply buried targets, be

needed. The most pressing requirement is for advanced intelligence capabilities, in order to be able to locate underground weapons laboratories or mobile launching pads dependably and in real-time. In addition to dependable data on the military capacity of the enemy, information about its intentions and targets must be gathered with certainty while under great pressure. The drastic mistaken appraisals by Western intelligence agencies prior to the war in Iraq demonstrate the dimensions of this challenge.

American military planners are well aware of the scope of the task and are estimating that the concept will take as long as until 2025 to complete. The political support for the "Prompt Global Strikes" project is surprisingly high: the US Congress gave the project, despite the enormous challenges and corresponding high costs, its overwhelming support in 2003.

2. Current Developments and Problems

At first the means of the US Air Force - Stealth aircraft, B1 and B2 bombers, cruise missiles, drones - were considered optimal for realizing the "Prompt Global Strikes" project. The American Air Force, however, increasingly got confronted with problems. A worldwide network of airbases, in order to reach possible targets expeditiously, is extremely costly. In many regions there is a decreasing willingness to provide territory for stationing American armed forces. In addition, Washington's certainty in receiving flyover rights in individual cases is decreasing.

In February 2006 the Pentagon therefore applied for the necessary financial means to convert the atomic warheads on some of the Trident missiles on American submarines to conventional ones. In the coming years a total of twelve submarines are scheduled to be equipped with two conventional Tridents each. By 2010 this process should reach the so-called "Full Operational Capability". In the following years, approximately one third of all atomic weapons on naval vessels are scheduled to have their atomic warheads replaced with conventional ones. This measure will both strengthen the concept of "Prompt Global Strikes" and coincide with the trend of transforming former nuclear operations into ones using conventional weapons.

Critics have raised the objection that a mixture of conventional and nuclear weapons could increase the chances of misunderstandings and lead to an "accidental" nuclear war. If a Trident missile were to be launched, to attack a WMD facility in North Korea or a weapons lab in Iran, for example, it would not be immediately detectable to the early-warning systems of Russia or China whether the launch was of an atomic or conventional weapon. Since such an early-warning would immediately be conveyed to the political leadership in Moscow or Beijing, a decision would have to be made

within minutes whether one was dealing with a nuclear attack via intercontinental weapons, or not. The Russian or Chinese procedures in such a case is not precisely known. In the U.S. case, in the past the National Security Adviser was given only three minutes to verify an alarm. The President then would have had an additional four minutes to decide on the appropriate reaction to the real or supposed attack. An unfortunate chain of events could, according to the critics, lead to an order being given for a nuclear counter strike, with devastating consequences, before the actual target of the mission could be determined. In January 1995 there was a similar situation when an American research rocket shot from a Norwegian island was registered by a Russian control center, triggering an alarm at the highest level in Moscow. It took several minutes before the 'all-clear' could be given, due to the non-threatening flight-path of the rocket.

The Pentagon claims to take these warnings very seriously, but sees the danger of miscalculation as marginal. There would be a secure emergency communication line with Russia or China, through which misunderstandings could be cleared up. There is also the long-standing practice of a mutual exchange of information concerning planned or impending rocket starts. Officials point to the fact that since 1968, even during the highpoint of the Cold War, 433 American test missile launches from land or sea have been pre-announced. In not one case were there misunderstandings with Moscow or Peking. In any case, say experts, Russia is the only country with an early-warning system in place to detect missile launches and thus the only country that needs to be notified. Russian experts are also able to detect the flight-path of a given missile and its impact point, and can therefore rule out an attack at an early stage.

A further problem presented by armament with conventional warhead rockets with intercontinental range comes from an unexpected angle. Iran is very engaged in developing long-range ballistic missiles. Europe and the USA often make a case that such a long-range rocket development program is proof that the nuclear activities in Iran have as their goal the development of nuclear weapons and not the generation of civilian energy. Long-range missiles, so the argument goes, are technologically demanding and extremely expensive because they must leave and reenter the earth's atmosphere during their ballistic flight-path. It would therefore be uneconomical to send a conventional missile on a journey of thousands of kilometers, in order to strike a target with a relatively limited effect. Thus, the Americans and Europeans conclude, long-range capabilities would only be developed in order to be fitted with a WMD-warhead (preferably a nuclear weapon) so as to achieve a political and strategic effect worth the effort and development work.

If this quite coherent argumentation is used in public to expose the true ambitions of the Iranians, it will be obvious that an American downgrading of intercontinental nuclear weapons with conventional warheads stands in direct logical contradiction.

True, one can point to the fact that due to America's significantly more efficient conventional weapons, with their precision and destructive power, a comparison with Iranian developments is ill advised. The public will hardly want to try to understand such complex arguments, however: if the USA can have long-range conventional missiles, then Iranian long-range missiles will hardly be accepted as an indicator for Iran's nuclear ambitions (especially if Teheran argues publicly to this effect).

From these two points alone it is clear that the idea of "Prompt Global Strikes" still contains conceptual weaknesses, which would have to be dealt with on the path to complete implementation. It also is clear that the consequences of this change in strategy reach far beyond the borders of the USA.

3. Conclusions

Given the nuclear crisis in Iran or the atomic ambitions of North Korea, nuclear weapons have once again become the focus of much public attention. While nuclear debates in Europe are frequently limited to the conviction that the idea of nuclear determent has at least partly lost validity in the 21st Century and urgently needs to be updated for the future requirements, in the USA this process has long been in effect. Largely unnoticed by Europeans, the United States has been fundamentally changing its nuclear strategy and the associated arsenal. Since new developments in strategic planning by the U.S. as the key ally in NATO have always had significant effects on the European partners, these developments should no longer be ignored in Europe. The experiences of the last decades have shown, especially in the nuclear area, that the USA is ready to take the strategic ideas and concerns of the Europeans into consideration, as long as they are coherently formulated. Given that, as in the past, American nuclear weapons are stationed on European soil through NATO, Europeans cannot avoid articulating their ideas on the role of nuclear weapons. This holds particularly true for Germany as one of the major NATO-partners and as a country where parts of NATO's nuclear posture are still deployed.

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