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Not Just A Last Resort?

A Global Strike Plan, With a Nuclear Option

By William Arkin

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Early last summer, Defense Secretary Donald H. Rumsfeld approved a top secret "Interim Global Strike Alert Order" directing the military to assume and maintain readiness to attack hostile countries that are developing weapons of mass destruction, specifically Iran and North Korea.

Two months later, Lt. Gen. Bruce Carlson, commander of the 8th Air Force, told a reporter that his fleet of B-2 and B-52 bombers had changed its way of operating so that it could be ready to carry out such missions. "We're now at the point where we are essentially on alert," Carlson said in an interview with the Shreveport (La.) Times. "We have the capacity to plan and execute global strikes." Carlson said his forces were the U.S. Strategic Command's "focal point for global strike" and could execute an attack "in half a day or less."

In the secret world of military planning, global strike has become the term of art to describe a specific preemptive attack. When military officials refer to global strike, they stress its conventional elements. Surprisingly, however, global strike also includes a nuclear option, which runs counter to traditional U.S. notions about the defensive role of nuclear weapons.

The official U.S. position on the use of nuclear weapons has not changed. Since the end of the Cold War, the United States has taken steps to de-emphasize the importance of its nuclear arsenal. The Bush administration has said it remains committed to reducing our nuclear stockpile while keeping a credible deterrent against other nuclear powers. Administration and military officials have stressed this continuity in testimony over the past several years before various congressional committees.

But a confluence of events, beginning with the Sept. 11, 2001 attacks and the president's forthright commitment to the idea of preemptive action to prevent future attacks, has set in motion a process that has led to a fundamental change in how the U.S. military might respond to certain possible threats. Understanding how we got to this point, and what it might mean for U.S. policy, is particularly important now -- with the renewed focus last week on Iran's nuclear intentions and on speculation that North Korea is ready to conduct its first test of a nuclear weapon.

Global strike has become one of the core missions for the Omaha-based Strategic Command, or Stratcom. Once, Stratcom oversaw only the nation's nuclear forces; now it has responsibility for overseeing a global strike plan with both conventional and nuclear options. President Bush spelled out the definition of "full-spectrum" global strike in a January 2003 classified directive, describing it as "a capability to deliver rapid, extended range, precision kinetic (nuclear and conventional) and non-kinetic (elements of space and information operations) effects in support of theater and national objectives."

This blurring of the nuclear/conventional line, wittingly or unwittingly, could heighten the risk that the nuclear option will be used. Exhibit A may be the Stratcom contingency plan for dealing with "imminent" threats from countries such as North Korea or Iran, formally known as CONPLAN 8022-02.

CONPLAN 8022 is different from other war plans in that it posits a small-scale operation and no "boots on the ground." The typical war plan encompasses an amalgam of forces -- air, ground, sea -- and takes into account the logistics and political dimensions needed to sustain those forces in protracted operations. All these elements generally require significant lead time to be effective. (Existing Pentagon war plans, developed for specific regions or "theaters," are essentially defensive responses to invasions or attacks. The global strike plan is offensive, triggered by the

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perception of an imminent threat and carried out by presidential order.)

CONPLAN 8022 anticipates two different scenarios. The first is a response to a specific and imminent nuclear threat, say in North Korea. A quick-reaction, highly choreographed strike would combine pinpoint bombing with electronic warfare and cyberattacks to disable a North Korean response, with commandos operating deep in enemy territory, perhaps even to take possession of the nuclear device.

The second scenario involves a more generic attack on an adversary's WMD infrastructure. Assume, for argument's sake, that Iran announces it is mounting a crash program to build a nuclear weapon. A multidimensional bombing (kinetic) and cyberwarfare (non-kinetic) attack might seek to destroy Iran's program, and special forces would be deployed to disable or isolate underground facilities.

By employing all of the tricks in the U.S. arsenal to immobilize an enemy country -- turning off the electricity, jamming and spoofing radars and communications, penetrating computer networks and garbling electronic commands -- global strike magnifies the impact of bombing by eliminating the need to physically destroy targets that have been disabled by other means.

The inclusion, therefore, of a nuclear weapons option in CONPLAN 8022 -- a specially configured earth-penetrating bomb to destroy deeply buried facilities, if any exist -- is particularly disconcerting. The global strike plan holds the nuclear option in reserve if intelligence suggests an "imminent" launch of an enemy nuclear strike on the United States or if there is a need to destroy hard-to-reach targets.

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