

LEARN ABOUT NUCLEAR WEAPONS

Nuclear doctrines

A doctrine is a guideline for how to act in different situations. The term is commonly used in security politics. A nuclear doctrine, shortly, outlines the situations a nuclear weapon state can and cannot use its nuclear weapons.

During the Cold War, the threshold for any of the nuclear weapon states to use their nuclear weapons was relatively high. The doctrine between the US and Russia was called MAD – Mutually Assured Destruction. That is, both sides would inevitably be annihilated in the event of a nuclear war. During the last years, the attitude in nuclear weapon states seems to be more and more in the line of considering the use of nuclear weapons a possibility. On the one hand, the development of smaller, tactical nuclear weapons for battlefield use indicate this change of attitude. On the other hand, several nuclear weapon states have made actual changes in their nuclear doctrines, lowering the threshold for using nuclear weapons.

Preemptive attack

A preemptive (or preventive) attack is understood as, just as it sounds, acting with military means before the enemy does so. For example: State A suspect an attack will be targeted against state A by state B. State A, therefore, swiftly orders a military attack against state B to avert an attack against its own territory and troops. After the 9/11 attacks at the World Trade Center and the Pentagon, the US claimed it faced further threats and hence called the invasion of Afghanistan a preemptive attack. However, the world was split in opinion on the legality of the US attack.

Preemptive war can be discussed from an international law standpoint. Article 2:4 in the UN Charter prohibits threat or use of violence against any other state unless an acute and imminent threat prevails. At the same time, article 51 of the same Charter allows for use of violence in self-defence.¹

Abraham D. Sofaer clarifies four important factors for a preemptive attack in any way to be considered acceptable²:

1. The nature and magnitude of the threat involved
2. The likelihood that the threat will be realised unless preemptive action is taken
3. The availability and exhaustion of alternatives to using force; and
4. Whether using preemptive force is consistent with the terms and purposes of the UN Charter and other applicable international agreements

The issue of preemptive attack is always tricky, as it always becomes an issue of subjective interpretations of reality. E.g. how can it be determined whether or not a threat is imminent enough and whether it will for sure be affected unless prevented with an attack? A state experiencing a threat will always interpret the situation in the worst possible way – just like humans do when feeling threatened. If a preemptive attack can be seen as self-defence or not, similarly becomes a question of motivations and explanations, that will always sound differently depending on the beholder. The one performing an act of preemption will obviously argue that the attack is done as an act of self defense (according to Article 51 of the UN Charter), while a preemptive attack on the other hand is not conducted as a response to an armed attack against the own state, making it a violation of Article 2:4 of the Charter.

The risk for nuclear weapons being used increases with the changed and more forgiving attitude towards the use of nuclear weapons in some of the nuclear weapon states' military doctrines. It is in direct contradiction to the official position of these states to make cuts in nuclear arsenals and reduce the role of nuclear weapons in national security strategies. It is a frightening development, where the threshold to nuclear weapons use is lowered and where arbitrary perceptions of threats and enemies can result in massive nuclear annihilation. The fact that nuclear weapon states make clear the option of using nuclear weapons preemptively exists, also increases the for new states feeling the need for nuclear weapons to protect national interests. Proliferation of nuclear weapons, on the other side, increases the risk for use of nuclear weapons – by mistake or by intention; as retaliation or preemption.

First-strike capacity

First-strike capacity indicates, just as it sounds like, the capacity to hit first. The term is used in nuclear strategies as a preemptive attack with considerable power. First strike capability is a country's ability to defeat another nuclear weapon state by destroying its arsenal to the point where the attacking country can survive the weakened retaliation while the opposing side is left unable to continue war. The preferred methodology is to attack the opponent's launch facilities and storage depots first.

During the Cold War, there was immense worry that the US or the Soviet Union would use their massive nuclear arsenals in a first strike. At several occasions, a nuclear war was close. Luckily, the use of nuclear weapons could be warded off until too late.

The US

For 25 years, until President George W. Bush took office, US nuclear policy was always that nuclear weapons would not be used against non-nuclear weapon states. In September 2002, the new US National Security Strategy was launched, for the first time opening the door to preemptive war. The strategy announced the US has to be prepared to prevent rouge states and terrorists before these can threaten or use weapons of mass destruction against the US or its allies.³

Since then, the Pentagon has revised the US nuclear doctrine. In March 2005, a new version of the Doctrine for Joint Nuclear Operations was presented. The new doctrine outlined the use of nuclear weapons in preventing an attack from a state or non-state actor planning to use weapons of mass destruction against the US or its allies. The doctrine also included the possibility of using nuclear weapons to destroy enemy stockpiles of nuclear, biological or chemical weapons. In addition, the need for acting quickly and in response to imminent threats is pointed out.⁴ The new doctrine took a totally opposite direction than the "reduced dependence on nuclear weapons" that the US

administration talks about – rather giving nuclear weapons a more prominent role and confirms the need for high-alert nuclear weapons for American security.

Around the same time as the revised Doctrine for Joint Nuclear Operations was published, reports on military strategic planning were launched under the term CONPLAN 8022. The plan discusses two different scenarios for a preemptive US nuclear attack. The one as a response to a specific and imminent nuclear threat, e.g. from North Korea; the other one as a response to a more extensive threat of weapons of mass destruction, e.g. from Iran. CONPLAN 8022 is the first document so clearly stating plans for a preemptive use of nuclear weapons against North Korea and Iran.⁵

After a critical analysis of the revised Doctrine for Joint Nuclear Operations in *Arms Control Today*⁶, an exhaustive article on its implications in the *Washington Post*⁷ and massive critique, the Pentagon formally cancelled the new doctrine in early 2006. The descriptions of preemptive use of nuclear weapons in the new doctrine prompted the Senate Armed Services Committee to ask the Pentagon for a briefing, and 16 lawmakers to protest to President Bush. The decision to cancel Doctrine for Joint Nuclear Operations, and with it three other related nuclear documents, was confirmed by the Pentagon. The cancellation of the documents does not change US nuclear policy which continues to include options for nuclear preemption.⁸

Russia

The Soviet Union had a pledge never to be the first state to use nuclear weapons against another state – a so called no-first use pledge. Then Soviet leader Leonid Brezjnev issued the pledge in 1982, but it perceived at the time as a propaganda move aimed at the anti-nuclear movements in the West, and not as a credible policy. In 1993, Russia announced abandoning this principle, thereby reserving the right to be the first state to use nuclear weapons.⁹

After the dissolution of the Soviet Union, Russia took on the former Soviet nuclear arsenal. After the end of the Cold War, Russian conventional forces were largely dissolved and the state's military contingencies split. This has made nuclear weapons even more important for Russia to maintain its status as a military superpower. In October 2003, President Vladimir Putin stated that Russian nuclear weapons defence constitutes the foundation for Russian security, today as well as in the future.¹⁰

In October 2004, the document *Immediate Tasks of Development of the Armed Forces of the Russian Federation* was launched. The document develops and details the policy presented in Russia's 2000 defence doctrine. The biggest change compared to earlier similar documents is the attitude towards preemptive attack. The Russian Defense Ministry lies down that preventive use of violence can not be ruled out. The statement does not concern nuclear weapons in particular, but given the role of nuclear weapons in Russian military strategy, the statement can be read as a threat of the possibility of preemptive nuclear attack.¹¹

In later years, a worrying development has taken place regarding the Russian nuclear doctrine, above all concerning the first-strike capacity with both tactical and strategic nuclear weapons. There appears to be a broad understanding between Russian military strategists that tactical nuclear weapons can be used in a regional crisis involving NATO or China. Regarding the strategic systems, Russia relies heavily on a so-called launch-on-warning system. This involves an advanced warning system giving the Russian military leadership notice of a possible enemy nuclear attack, which starts off a Russian nuclear counter attack. This system leaves space for mistakes that, in the

worst case, can start off a massive nuclear attack. Some military strategists, therefore, advocate a remodelling of strategic forces to a first-strike capacity.¹²

In January 2008, Chief of the Russian General Staff Yury Baluevsky stated that Russia does not exclude a preemptive nuclear strike. He clarified that Russia today has no plans of attacking any other state with nuclear weapons, but that regional conflicts and international terrorism pose a large threat.¹³

The UK

The UK and the US have been close partners throughout the nuclear age. In the run up to the invasion of Iraq in 2003, the UK position became clear. “They [Iraq] can be absolutely confident that in the right conditions we would be willing to use our nuclear weapons”, Defense Minister Geoffrey Hoon stated during an examination in the House of Commons in March 2002¹⁴ – a phrase that was repeated several times before the invasion. This is a change in position from earlier British politicians who usually have stated that “we don't rule anything out if anyone attacks us”¹⁵

France

On 19 January 2006, the French President Jacques Chirac gave a much-noticed speech on the atomic submarine base Ile-Longue. In this speech, he made clear that countries, which support terrorism or desire weapons of mass destruction, are at risk of a tactical nuclear attack.¹⁶ President Sarkozy has appointed a commission to develop a new French security strategy, in which the current role of nuclear weapons in France will be clarified. The new strategy is expected during spring 2008.

China

After the first Chinese nuclear test in 1964, the national leadership made clear that China would follow a no-first-use policy – that is, never be the first state to use nuclear weapons against an enemy. China's limited nuclear arsenal would be used to deter from an attack, and could be used as a counter attack if an aggressor used nuclear weapons against China. The Chinese government has repeated this statement several times during the more than 40 years that have passed.¹⁷

China is the only official nuclear weapon state to issue a no-first-use pledge. In May 2005, Chinese representatives had to reiterate the pledge. A dean at the Chinese National Defense University, Major General Zhu Chenghu, threatened during a press conference that China would use nuclear weapons against the US in the event of a military conflict between the states regarding Taiwan. The Chinese government was quick to clarify that the statement of the General reflected his personal opinions and not a change in China's no-first-use policy. Analyst find it unlikely that China would re-evaluate its nuclear policy within a foreseeable future.¹⁸

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- ¹ <http://www.un.org/aboutun/charter>
 - ² Sofaer, Abraham D. *On the Necessity of Pre-emption*, European Journal of International Law 2003 14(2):209-226
 - ³ <http://www.whitehouse.gov/nsc/nss.pdf>
 - ⁴ <http://www.acronym.org.uk/docs/0503/usdoctrine.pdf>
 - ⁵ <http://www.washingtonpost.com/wp-dyn/content/article/2005/05/14/AR2005051400071.html>
 - ⁶ http://www.armscontrol.org/act/2005_09/Kristensen.asp#note01
 - ⁷ <http://www.washingtonpost.com/wp-dyn/content/article/2005/09/10/AR2005091001053.html>
 - ⁸ http://www.fas.org/blog/ssp/2006/02/pentagon_cancels_controversial.php
 - ⁹ <http://query.nytimes.com/gst/fullpage.html?res=9F0CEFDD113FF937A35752C1A965958260>
 - ¹⁰ http://www.ifri.org/files/Securite_defense/prolif_12_Trenin.pdf
 - ¹¹ <http://cns.miis.edu/pubs/reports/sok1003.htm>
 - ¹² http://www.brookings.edu/testimony/1997/0317defense_blair.aspx
 - ¹³ <http://www.russiatoday.ru/news/news/19844>
 - ¹⁴ <http://www.parliament.the-stationery-office.co.uk/pa/cm200102/cmselect/cmdfence/644/2032008.htm>
 - ¹⁵ <http://www.guardian.co.uk/world/2002/jun/06/india.foreignpolicy>
 - ¹⁶ <http://www.spiegel.de/international/0,1518,396191,00.html>
 - ¹⁷ http://www.wmdinsights.com/I8/I8_EA3_BeyondNoFirstUse.htm
 - ¹⁸ http://www.nti.org/e_research/e3_70.html