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Facing the WMD Threat: the new official US strategy[†]

Just as numerous arrests were being made across Europe allegedly of terrorists planning unconventional chemical attacks against targets in Italy, France and the UK, and as the United States - despite ramped up UN inspections in Iraq – appears to preparing at full throttle for a war against the Baghdad regime, Washington saw fit in December to publish its new National Strategy to Combat Weapons of Mass Destruction (NSCWMD). Whilst the lack of coverage concerning this release is understandable given recent international events, the document deserves closer attention, for although it may not be fully representative of the new so-called Bush Doctrine, it will likely become the most influential document informing US actions in the face of the WMD threat for some time to come. As such it leaves somewhat to be desired.

The Stage is Set

From the very opening of this rather short (6 page) document, the new ideological clarity of the current White Houses' threat perception is evident. Starting as it does with a direct quote from the President, the NSCWMD makes it clear that the enemies of the United States are "*seeking weapons of mass destruction with determination*" and that "[T]he United States will not allow these efforts to succeed...." The new NSCWMD is demonstrably designed to bolster a proactive, interdiction-orientated approach to the threat as it continues to state that "*the only path to peace and security is the path of action.*" What exactly will this "path of action" consist of? According to the NSCWMD, the United States has three inter-linked tools formulated to mitigate the WMD threat. These are: Counterproliferation, Nonproliferation and WMD Consequence Management. They consist essentially of the following elements.

Counterproliferation

The emphasis here is on interdiction of know-how, materials and technology, given that terrorist groups and hostile nations will ultimately be able to flout current non-proliferation regimes and treaties. There is a new emphasis on deterrence, with the in-built condition that Washington reserves the right to use "overwhelming force" and "all options" in the face of an emerging threat. Perhaps the most significant element of the document is its one sentence reinforcement the also recently released new National Security Strategy when it talks of "preemptive measures." The logic being that even despite the declared intention of Washington to use overwhelming force against anyone who dares to employ WMD against the US, in some cases this may

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simply not be adequate enough a deterrent, and as a result the US wishes to leave open the option to remove the threat with force prior to it being fully activated. Whilst the logic here is clear: some actors, especially those with a “rogue” or irrational character will fail to go through the cost-benefit calculations which make it clear that WMD attacks are untenable and they too must be neutralized, the fact remains that with this step the US has crossed a threshold in openly embracing a tactic made famous of late by Israel, but which has yet to be recognized as valid in international practice.

Nonproliferation

Whilst the current US administration with the NSCWMD makes it clear that it has made additions to its tool box of responses to the unconventional threat of nuclear, bio/chemical or radiological attack, this is not to say that it disregards older tools designed to manage the WMD problem in a less forceful fashion. Existing bilateral and multilateral nonproliferation arrangements are to be strengthened and increased in number. This includes the formulation and negotiation of a Fissile Material Cut-Off Treaty and a bolstering of the existing Biological Weapons Convention (BWC). Perhaps most significantly in this section of the NSCWMD, is the one unequivocal statement that “countries will be held responsible for complying with their (nonproliferation) commitments”. How exactly this will be done is not explained and would be good to know especially if we note that in the case of Iraq for example, the vast majority of its WMD technology and know-how was supplied not by rogue nations or the Russian Federation or China but by NATO allies, Germany being the foremost transgressor. How the White House will make Berlin and other allies keep to their commitments is not obvious.

WMD Consequence Management

Of all the NSCWMD’s sections this is the shortest, outlining as it does solely the continued need to coordinate the myriad agencies and first-responder capabilities that will be the crucial and primary element in mitigating any WMD attack occurring on the American mainland. Of course in this America effort will continue to suffer as it attempts to heighten efficiency, crippled as it somewhat is by the tri-layer structure of local, state and federal authorities and emergency services that often duplicate responsibilities and capabilities and which often do not communicate well with each other. In order to sort through this maze of competencies the document outlines overarching responsibilities of coordination for the White House’s Office of Homeland Security and the National Security Council’s Office of Combating Terrorism.



The NSCWMD: a preliminary verdict

Whilst TSM would not agree with some Washington based pundits who have slammed the new strategy for revitalizing the nuclear arms race (John Isaacs of the Council for a Livable World has already gone on record to state that the NSCWMD's "all options" clause in response to the WMD threat dangerously lowers "the threshold for wreaking nuclear devastation across the planet"), the document is inherently flawed and seriously so.

The internal logic of the NSCWMD is largely sound, but only if digested from a nation-state perspective. Practically nothing in its pages is addressed to the potentially most difficult to deter WMD opponent, the non-state actor, or terrorist group. Heightened diplomatic efforts, strengthened non-proliferation regimes are of little concern to extremists, as is the threat of nuclear strike on behalf of Washington. If we are prepared to state that al Qaeda's base has been destroyed in Afghanistan, where then would the US target its nuclear-tipped cruise missiles if a WMD attack was executed against a US city tomorrow? As we have seen, those associated with the group have been living quite happily until recently in the allied nations of Europe. These are not viable targets for the use of "overwhelming force".

The document has merit as far as being a tool addressed to rogue nations and more rational yet troublesome countries. Hopefully the Bush White House is working on a message to send to the estimated 30-80,000 graduates of the al Qaeda training facilities which will be as forceful as the one it is sending to these nations states. If not then it is hard to perceive what will make a determined al Qaeda cell think twice about using the most devastating of weapons in the near future.

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