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NUCLEAR NIGHTMARES: ALSO FROM THE US

Oscar Palma*

ABSTRACT

One of the major concerns in the international community's security agenda is nuclear proliferation, particularly, the cases of Iran and North Korea. It is feared that the efforts of these regimes to constitute stable nuclear programs will lead into the use of a nuclear weapon, specifically, against western powers or their allies in different latitudes.

However, what is not usually deeply analyzed is the impact on international stability that the nuclear program of the United States has, specially its modernizations and its recurrence to defensive capabilities. These programs, as an instrument of an understanding of its role on the post Cold War world, send a message of legitimacy for this type of arsenals in contemporary strategy, and force 'enemy' states to recur to military nuclear capabilities to guarantee their own security.

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Keywords: Nuclear proliferation, Iran, North Korea, Nuclear Triad, US Nuclear Policy, deterrence, preventive attack, National Missile Defense, Missile Shield

RESUMEN

Una de las mayores preocupaciones actuales de la comunidad internacional respecto a su agenda de seguridad es la proliferación nuclear, y particularmente los casos de Irán y Corea del Norte. Se teme que los esfuerzos de los regímenes de estos dos países para constituir un programa nuclear estable concluyan en la utilización de un arma nuclear, específicamente, contra potencias occidentales o sus aliados en diferentes latitudes.

Pero, lo que no se analiza a profundidad es el impacto que genera el programa nuclear de Estados Unidos sobre la estabilidad internacional, especialmente sus modernizaciones y su recurrencia a capacidades defensivas. Estos programas, como instrumento de un entendimiento particular de su papel en el mundo de posguerra fría, envían un mensaje de legitimidad de este tipo de arsenales en la estrategia contemporánea, y obligan a países 'enemigos' a recurrir a capacidades militares nucleares para garantizar su seguridad.

Palabras Clave: Proliferación Nuclear, Irán, Corea del Norte, Triada Nuclear, Política Nuclear, disuasión, ataque preventivo, Escudo Nuclear

In the second nuclear age, after the fear of an unprecedented level of destruction between East and West disappeared, the main concern remains the emergence of new nuclear states, most notably Iran and North Korea. The Persians have increased considerably its capacity to enrich uranium allegedly reaching a total of 5000 centrifuges in its Natanz enrichment complex, while North Korea tested nuclear devices twice, and launched ballistic missiles in several opportunities this year.

The threat, the argument goes, consists on the irrational decision making process that characterizes these states, through which, in their pursuit of an ideological end, self-sacrifice becomes a valid mean, hence, the possibility of the use of a nuclear weapon increases. Whether the emergence of new nuclear states represents a threat to international security or if it contributes to its stability, remains a main issue of debate in academic and official circles, and the discussion will undoubtedly continue. But another nuclear reality that may be more challenging than new states joining the nuclear club, is not debated as often as it should be: the impact that the evolution of the American nuclear policy, the so-called new nuclear triad and the linkage of these elements with its foreign policy and global interests, have on global security.

The following analysis will demonstrate that the American position poses a challenge to international order through at least two dynamics: On a macro level, because its possession of a nuclear arsenal

as a valid strategic component for defense, creates systemic conditions and values in which nuclear weapons are valid instruments of security, forcing its enemies to recur to the same elements if their security is to be guaranteed; and on a direct micro level because a military exchange with a particular actor, whether conventional or unconventional, is more likely to come from a preventive attack by the United States and/or an allied state, than from a suicidal nuclear attack from such enemy. This, because it is the American interest to remain undeterred, to avoid the erosion of its capacity to control the escalation of conflict, and the impossibility of imposing its will by strength.

For this purpose, an analysis of the main schools of thought regarding the impact of proliferation will be made, followed by an analysis of the role of the United States in the Post Cold War world, taking into account its interest and its vision. Then an analysis of current nuclear policies of the US will follow, ending with the observation of why this might be a challenge to global security.

NUCLEAR WEAPONS FOR WHAT?

It is essential to understand the purpose of nuclear weapons in policy and strategy. In the historical debate to define their role and their impact on international security and stability, Phil Williams recognizes three main currents of thought.¹

The *abolitionists* who believe that arms races are potential causes of war, and nuclear weapons should be eliminated. They adopt a liberalist point of view of international relations, linked to international law organizations. They look at the state as a disappearing entity in a smaller world with the emergence of new threats that ignore national borders, a world where nuclear weapons can't contribute with the provision of security. In this atmosphere, nuclear weapons do not help stabilize international politics. They exacerbate the possibility of conflict, increasing environmental and political damage.

Today, this spirit is materialized in the Canberra Commission Report, which recommends a 20 to 30 years process to eliminate nuclear weapons.² In the same spirit Graham Allison, Director of the Belfer Center for Science and International Affairs at the University of Harvard, focuses on terrorism as one of the main threats deriving from nuclear weapons. He argues that as the number of weapons and fissile materials increase worldwide, so does the probability of a terrorist organization of acquiring a weapon, who, undeterred, might not feel any constriction to use against a powerful enemy.

On the other hand, there are the *deterriers*. They believe in the positive effect of nuclear weapons and propose the effort of the international community should not be aimed at the total abolishment, but to maintain their benefits while reducing the dangers.

¹ Phil Williams, «Nuclear Weapons and Arms Control» in J. Baylis and N.J. Rengger, *Dilemmas of World Politics* (Oxford: Oxford University Press) 1992. p. 206

² Payne, Keith, «The Case against Nuclear abolition and for deterrence» *Comparative Strategy*, Vol. 17 Issue 1, (Jan-Mar 98) p. 9

They constituted one of the influential tendencies during the Cold War, headed by Bernard Brodie, a researcher at the influential think tank, RAND Corporation. He believed that with nuclear weapons the costs of war outweighed any meaningful political goal, so the purpose became not winning or fighting wars, but preventing them.³ Under this logic, states that possess nuclear weapons are unlikely to engage in war; hence, nuclear weapons bring stability. This is the logical base of nuclear deterrence, and the basic explanation of why new nuclear states like North Korea or Iran would not represent a threat.

Although scholars have written an uncountable number of definitions for deterrence, it was Professor William Kauffman in 1954 to make a verbal description of what until then have been mathematical models:

«Essentially, deterrence means preventing certain types of contingencies from arising. To achieve this objective, it becomes necessary to communicate in some way to a prospective antagonist what is likely to happen to him, should he create the situation in question. The expectation is that, confronted with this prospect he will be deterred from taking the action that is regarded as inimical -at least so long as other less intolerable alternatives are opened to him».⁴

There is a twofold component in deterrence: capability and credibility. States must count on the capacity to deliver the damage threatened to be produced; and the other state must believe that they will respond if attacked. So there is a remarkable importance of technical qualities, but there is also a psychological dimension that according to deterrers like Raymond Aron and Thomas Schelling is as relevant as the technical aspects.⁵ This view strengthens deterrence by new nuclear states like Iran and Venezuela who might not have highly developed technical capabilities, relying more on psychological aspects.

The ideas of deterrers, including Waltz's arguments exposed ahead will explain why the existence of nuclear Iran and North Korea would not necessarily represent a threat to international security, or a factor that leads into war.

Finally, the *Targeteers* believe that nuclear weapons have not brought a revolution in military strategy. War remains the same, and the logic of war is equal. Unlike abolitionists, they believe nuclear weapons have a military purpose. They propose to reform nuclear weapons to turn them into usable instruments of military tactics.

³ J. Porro, «The Policy War: Brodie vs. Kahn» in J. Harris and E. Markusen, *Nuclear Weapons and the Threat of Nuclear War* (Orlando, Florida: Hacourt Brace Jovanovich) 1986. p. 91

⁴ R. Rosecrance, «Strategic Deterrence Reconsidered» in C. Bertram, *Strategic Deterrence in a Changing Environment*, (London: The International Institute of Strategic Studies), 1981 p. 7

⁵ A. Legault, *The dynamics of the Nuclear Balance*, (Ithaca, N.Y: Cornell University Press) 1974, p. 143

They think that if a high level of damage is accepted, calculations on how to win are possible. This argument was discussed by another researcher at RAND, Herman Kahn during the Cold War. He believed that the limits of the catastrophe depend on the preparations made and how the war is started and fought, leaving a possibility to cope with damage. Ultimately the question to answer was «what possible political goal could justify the loss of hundreds of cities or even a few million people?»⁶

If the Iranian or the Korean dilemmas are analysed, the outcome would be radically different from each perspective. For deterrers, their nuclear programmes might not represent an immediate threat to Security, and may even contribute to it, especially if a spread of weapons reaches other states in their region, achieving a condition of mutual deterrence. Rationality is a relevant element of analysis. Kenneth Waltz believes leaders of states considered as irrational and willing to be sacrificed for a particular objective, might not really be so:

«Despite wild rhetoric aimed at foreigners, however, these irrational rulers [Muammar Qaddafi and Idi Amin] became cautious and modest when punitive actions against them might have threatened their ability to rule... [Leaders such as these] are deterred from taking inordinate risks, not only because they engage in intricate rational calculations but simply because they, like other rules, are sensitive to costs»⁷

Similarly, he states:

«Many westerners write fearfully about a future in which third world countries have nuclear weapons. They seem to view their people in the old imperial manner 'as lesser breeds without the law. As ever with ethnocentric views, speculation takes the place of evidence»⁸

The will of these countries to launch an attack could then be analyzed through several questions: Are Iran and North Korea really willing to sacrifice a significant proportion of their populations, a destruction of one or more of their cities, of their industrial and military capabilities, after attacking a powerful country for the sake of a particular ideology or philosophy? Is Kim Jong Il willing to tolerate the end of its regime as a consequence of taking the initiative to attack a powerful enemy such as the United States, or maybe even Korea or Japan? Are the Iranian Ayatollahs prepared to witness the end of its revolution as a result of attacking a world western power or maybe Israel? Wouldn't these actions precisely go against their interests of preserving their regimes?

It wouldn't seem coherent with their interest to launch nuclear attacks against their enemies, not even with Iran's fiery rhetoric against Israel. So the threat might be overestimated, but it would also

⁶ J. Porro, (1986), pp. 92-93

⁷ S. Sagan y K. Waltz, *The Spread of Nuclear Weapons: A debate*. (New York, USA: WW. Norton) 1995, p. 12

⁸ S. Sagan y K. Waltz, *Ibidem*, p. 12

be incorrect to state that it is entirely inexistent. Errors and miscalculations, although remote, might happen; and the possibility of a terrorist organization acquiring a nuclear device must not be discarded. But, how is this observed from the American perspective? What impact would it have on American's interest? To answer such questions, it is necessary to understand the role and interests of the United States in the post Cold War Order.

THE AMERICAN IMPERIUM

Through history, world powers have fought for the definition of the ideal system that to organize the political, economic and social dimensions of a modern society. As Philip Bobbit presents it in *The Shield of Achilles, War, Peace, and the Course of History*, -an influential book of the course of history through conflict, worshiped by Tony Blair, Hillary Clinton, Prince Hassan and John Howard⁹-, there was an extensive war between Democracy (Parliamentarism), Fascism and Communism, clash that would seem to explain the underlying causes of the Great War, the Second World War and the Cold War.¹⁰ When the Soviet Union imploded, the United States was destined to be the only super power, the *hyperpuissance*, the most powerful state for the 21st Century, and the leader of the international system. Democracy triumphed.

George Friedman, the founder of STRATFOR¹¹ labelled this event as the dawn of the American age. The beginning of an era where this nation not only remains as the unique world super power, but characterized by its efforts to maintain such status, and by other powers to compete: «The United States is economically, militarily, and politically the most powerful country in the world and there is no real challenger to that power... The inherent power of the United States coupled with its geographic position makes the United States the pivotal actor of the twenty-first century, therefore, particularly the first half, will evolve around two opposing struggles. One will be secondary powers forming coalitions to try to contain and control the United States. The second will be the United States acting pre-emptively to prevent an effective coalition from forming»¹²

Of course, It is of interest for the United States to remain in its position as the world's strongest state and, if possible, without any strong competition. This is an idea that goes beyond partisan militancy and governments; it is the vision of a nation.

⁹ S. Armstrong, *War Plc. The Rise of the New Corporate Mercenary*, (London: Faber and Faber), 2008, p. 78

¹⁰ See: P. Bobbit, *The Shield of Achilles, War, Peace, and the Course of History* (USA: Anchor Books), 2002, p. 21 - 45

¹¹ The Strategic Forecasting Inc. STRATFOR is a private company that provides global intelligence services to diverse companies and probably governments around the world. Often referred to as 'the shadow CIA'

¹² G. Friedman, *The Next 100 Years, a Forecast for the 21st Century*, (New York: Doubleday), p. 4 -5.

The idea of American hegemony is not new, it was highly promoted by Presidents like Theodore Roosevelt and Harry Truman¹³ and it lasts until today. It is what Andrew Bacevich has labelled as «the grand strategy to preserve and expand the American imperium.»¹⁴ Philosophically this expansion has been based on a discourse that promotes liberal-democracy. But in the bottom, there is more than a discourse; there are strategic and economic interests for this country. The mission however is developed today under a new security context, and nuclear weapons are meant to play a particular role as it will be analysed ahead.

The events of 9-11 forced George W. Bush to look at the world from a different perspective, and to understand security as affected by different phenomena which were not considered as strong or capable in previous contexts. For this new security atmosphere, the National Security Strategy adopted in 2002 established four key determinations summarized by Richard Jervis as follows:

- «1- Democracy and Liberalism: The belief in the importance of a state's domestic regime determining its Foreign Policy and a judgement that it is an opportune time to transform international politics.
- 2- Threat and preventive war: A perception of threats that can only be defeated only by new policies, mostly preventive war;
- 3- Unilateralism: The will to act unilaterally if necessary
- 4- American Hegemony: The belief that peace and stability require the US to assert its primacy role in world politics.»¹⁵

According to the historian John Lewis Gaddis, three were the main pillars of Bush's policy: To defend the peace of terrorists and tyrants; to preserve peace and good relations with great powers; and to appeal to universal values and extend peace, which means, opening societies.¹⁶ A new context of deterrence emerged including not only the traditional major powers; but also pseudo liberal democracies (e.g. Iran, Russia, and China) and sub national and terrorist groups¹⁷

In this understanding of security, what was supposed to happen with the nuclear arsenals and policies?

¹³ A. Bacevich, *American Empire*, (Cambridge, USA: Harvard University Press), 2003 p. 5

¹⁴ A. Bacevich, (2003) p. 3

¹⁵ R. Jervis, «Understanding the Bush Doctrine» in *Political Science Quarterly* 2003, Issue 3, p. 365

¹⁶ J.L. Gaddis, «A Grand Strategy of Transformation», *Foreign Policy* 133 (2002), p. 50

¹⁷ K. Payne, «Post Cold War Requirements for Nuclear Deterrence Policy, *Comparative Strategy* Vol. 17 (1998) pp. 228 - 229

THE POLICY INSTRUMENTS

Consistent with this new understanding of global security, and under the interest of remaining as the sole superpower in the international system, a new nuclear policy needed to be formulated. This was the logic of the Quadrennial Defense Review (QDR) held in 2002 and the Nuclear Posture Review (NPR) held in 2006.

The QDR clarified US strategic goals, setting new ones including the assurance to its allies and other friendly countries of the commitment to their own security; to dissuade adversaries from competing militarily with the United States; to deter coercion or attack; and if necessary, to defeat adversaries decisively.¹⁸

The NPR is designed to ensure the United States possesses the capabilities to adapt to geo-strategic and technological change and the flexibility to respond to a range of contingencies. This includes extending targeting requirements, the incorporation of conventional offensive and defensive capabilities and to prepare for deterrence failure.¹⁹ It focuses on how adversaries fight and not who fights, allowing flexibility to confront multiple possible enemies.

In practical terms, this means the US should be ready not only to deter, but to attack if necessary, both traditional enemies constituted by states, and new enemies such as terrorist organizations and rogue regimes. As the White House clearly stated in the National Security Policy Directive-17 «the US is committed to respond with «overwhelming force, including potential nuclear weapons, to a WMD attack by either a terrorist or a rogue state.»²⁰

In the bottom the NPR is nothing less than the materialization of targeteers' dreams. It is a process of transformation that «contributes to the notion that nuclear weapons can be equated with conventional weapons. It is the *conventionalization of nuclear weapons*».²¹

This is possible through the implementation of the so-called new nuclear triad composed by offensive strategic systems, active and passive defences and responsive infrastructure.

In the *offensive capabilities* component, the objective is to gradually increase the quality of nuclear weapons while reducing the arsenal stock. There is transformation of the arsenal to make it better

¹⁸ B. Fearey, P. White, J. Ledger and J. «An Analysis of Reduced Collateral Damage Nuclear Weapons». *Comparative Strategy*, Vol. 22 Issue 4, 2003, p. 305

¹⁹ D.S. McDonough, *Nuclear Superiority: The New Triad and the Evolution of Nuclear Strategy*. Adelphi Paper 383. (London: Routledge) 2006, p. 43

²⁰ President George W. Bush. «National Security Presidential Directive No. 17: National Strategy to Combat Weapons of Mass Destruction.» *Federation of American Scientists*. December 2002. <http://www.fas.org/irp/offdocs/nspd/nspd-wmd.pdf>, Accessed in August 9, 2007.

²¹ D.S. McDonough, (2006), p. 7

tailored for counter proliferation missions against rogue states. This includes the development of Earth Penetrator Weapons (EPW) necessary to destroy hard and deeply buried targets (HDBT); the perfection of Reduced Collateral Damage (RCD) weapons, necessary to reduce impact on civilians; and the development of Agent Defect Weapons (ADW), to neutralize biological or chemical agents.²²

The 'active and passive defences' component of the triad is justified by the alleged willingness of new enemies to use nuclear weapons. The National Security *Presidential Directive NSPD- 23 about National Policy on Ballistic Missile Defense* states that adversaries are perceived as having potential risk-prone leaders who see WMD as weapons of choice and not as weapons of last resort, and this fact raises the spectre of irrational or undeterrable rogue states.²³ Since deterrence is ineffective with such actors, then solid defences become necessary.

Passive defences include a whole range of actions to «reduce the probability and minimize the effects of damage caused by a hostile action without the intention of taking the initiative»²⁴, from troop mobility to mass vaccination.

Active defence is the employment of limited offensive action to deny a contested area or position to an enemy. In this field the Bush Administration wanted to eliminate the rhetorical differences created between the National Missile Defense, a programme to protect the continental United States from any incoming missile, and the Theatre Missile Defenses, used abroad to protect specific military targets. The objective is to create a global multilayered missile defense system to protect both continental US and troops abroad from any attack coming from a rogue state or a nuclear power like Russia or China.

Finally, the 'responsive infrastructure' component requires the modernization of all the systems related to nuclear capability to make the new triad possible. This includes the modernization of delivery systems and the nuclear weapon production complex.

IMPACT OF AMERICAN POLICIES

The impact that the nuclear build-up could have, may be appreciated through the different roles or messages the US would demonstrate in this new nuclear scenario.

US as self-centred and deal breaker: To begin with, during the Bush administration the White House sent a message that it cared only about US interests, and that allied or external power positions should not undermine or somehow restrain the achievement of US goals. This is evident through

²² D.S. McDonough, (2006), p. 44

²³ D.S. McDonough, (2006), pp. 50-51

²⁴ D.S. McDonough, (2006), p. 51

the unilateral termination of the Anti Ballistic Missile Treaty with Russia, a decision which, without even considering the Russian government's opinion, led to the increase of tensions between the two nations to its highest point since the fall of the Berlin Wall.

US as hegemonic attacker: If there is a flawless development of the new triad the American government would not only guarantee the control of escalation of war and deny deterrence from asymmetrical regional adversaries, it would also deny escalation dominance from powers like Russia and China. The US would achieve a first strike capability preventing enemy retaliation, with the possibility to attack any state at its will, while making it more arduous and costly for any adversary to compete militarily with or wage war against this nation.²⁵ In other words, this means the United States would have become almost invincible, in conventional and strategic terms of course, and the impossibility to be deterred, thanks to its reliance on a missile shield that would destroy any incoming missile, would make it the only actor worldwide with the capacity to attack at its will without fearing any consequences.

Couldn't this be risky? The government will always state that since the United States is a democracy, with deep constitutional and legal foundations, with an embedded sense of right and wrong, and consideration and respect for humanity, any attack would never be of self interest but only in case of self-defence or justified by conditions that are evident worldwide. But how to guarantee that such idea is really applied to nuclear policy? How to be certain that a particular understanding of the situation by decision makers is not far from an objective view of what should be correct in that particular moment? How to be sure any future administration would not act based on particular interests?

US as systemic messenger: The White House is sending the message that nuclear weapons are vital in current military strategies, and represent a key component of security. It is thus promoting systemic conditions and values in which nuclear weapons are a valid and maybe desirable component for security and defense. Systemic pressures would unavoidably force states to consider either renovation of current arsenals and doctrines or construction of new nuclear military programmes if their security is to be guaranteed; this, especially, if confrontation with the US has been a general bilateral behaviour.

US as a pressure for the rest to arm: Its military build up then, will unavoidably force actors to resort to nuclear weapons. This can be seen in two different levels: vis-à-vis rogue states or potential new nuclear states, and vis-a-vis world powers.

If observed from the point of view of Iran and North Korea, the development of a military nuclear programme is an understandable necessity. With the world's only nuclear hyper power as their enemy, with constant threats of attack and discourses of regime change, which instrument could guarantee their security other than nuclear weapons? If they observe what happened in Baghdad, a war of choice justified by an excuse which was later proved as wrong, would not a proper course

²⁵ D.S. McDonough, (2006), p. 63

of action be to acquire a deterrent capacity to avoid such scenario? It is said that the US increased its clandestine activity in Iran and some operations including simulated nuclear weapons delivery missions in the Arab Sea.²⁶ Wouldn't this force the Iranian government to think about increasing its defenses?

As *The New Statesman* analyses: «It now seems clear that both Iran and North Korea concluded that only by hastily increasing their nuclear capability would they stand a chance of deterring a conventional asymmetrical military attack by the US. In other words, the White House created a powerful incentive for the proliferation of nuclear weapons».²⁷

Regarding world powers, the effect of US nuclear modernization is epitomized by its current dilemma with Russia. The NMD system includes a plan to install ten Patriot interceptor missiles in Poland, of 3000 km of range each, and a radar in the Czech Republic. The argument, as explained by the American government, is that since Russia is not a threat to US Security anymore, and other states such as Iran might be willing to attack European allies if a capacity is acquired, then there is no other guarantee to security, for both continental US and allies, than a system of missile interceptors.

The Russian government argues, and it is purely logical, that the installation of missile defenses in its 'backyard' effectively erodes its capacity to deter the United States, being left defenseless. The continuation of this efforts would only push the Kremlin forward to develop new offensive capabilities, especially ways to surpass the American defense shield, and why not, a defense system of its own. The American position gravely hurt bilateral relations during the last years of the Bush administration, probably reaching the lowest point since the end of the Cold War.

A high cost for security would be understandable if the gains were high, but truth is such is not the case. It is impossible to guarantee an entirely effective mechanism to destroy incoming missiles; so far tests done for the NMD haven't been entirely successful.²⁸ «The expected value of a Missile Defense System is low because it is unlikely to enhance global security above levels offered by retaliatory defense.»²⁹

From a contrasting point of view, one of an ally, other powers such as the United Kingdom have sought to modernize their nuclear weapons systems. Downing Street is seeking to modernize its programme of out-of-date Trident Submarine Launched Ballistic Missiles. Its government is part of

²⁶ S. Hearsh, «The Iran Plans», *The New Yorker: Annals of National Security*. April 10, 2006. http://www.newyorker.com/printables/fact/060417fa_fact. Accessed in June 9, 2007

²⁷ *New Statesman* «Faith in an Old Nuclear Order will Compound the Dangers» October 16, 2006, p. 4

²⁸ W.Hartung and M.Ciarrocca, «Star Wars, Continued», *International Monitor Magazine*, http://www.thirdworldtraveler.com/Pentagon_military/Star_Wars_Continued.html, Oct. 2002, accessed in August 30, 2007

²⁹ J. Lebovic, «The Law of Small Numbers», *Journal Of Conflict Resolution*, Vol. 46 No. 4, (2002) p. 455

another American programme for six new types of bombs.³⁰ France considers moving away from the pure deterrence-only doctrine, looking for evolutions in precision, yield and reduction of collateral damage, and control.³¹ This updates would not generate a security dilemma with the United States.

US as a preventive attacker: Probably the most threatening scenario is a preventive attack by the United States, or by extension, by one of its allies, which might be produced when the vision and understanding of the role and interests of the United States in the Post Cold War world, as analysed before, are taken into account: This, not particularly because rogue regimes could attack the US or its troops in their regions, but because they would have a vital instrument to both deter an American military action, and more importantly, restrain its influence in the region by challenging policies and actions determined to be taken by the White House. Such loss of influence is of course opposite with US stated ambitions to remain the sole super power in a unipolar international system.

As exemplified by Richard Jervis on the case of Iraq, it is a mistake to jump from the fact that Saddam is evil to the conclusion that his possession of nuclear weapons threatened the US and world peace. The real problem was that Iraq would have acquired an ability to deter the American government from protecting its allies in the region.³² In other words, its not that deterrence might fail, it is more like the US is being deterred, and this is exactly what it will avoid at any cost. The government could then be highly motivated to make pre-emptive attacks before the nuclear capabilities of other states have been completed.

Following the ideas of George Friedman presented above, this would be a natural and consequent action of America's interest to remain as the sole superpower and to stop others from either becoming a significant competitor or an obstacle in its path.

From another point of view, the new triad strategy generates a very destabilizing psychological cycle that invites the actors of nuclear dyad to launch a strike. The predisposition of the NPR to make a first strike is an invitation for states to use their nuclear weapons before they are entirely destroyed. This position might be taken as certain by the American government whose knowledge that a 'rogue' state's attack has become more attractive, increases its interest on a first strike.³³

Although in theory the United States would be triumphant, in practice, the scenario would be a failure. It is extremely difficult to guarantee a total success of a counter proliferation pre-emptive attack. Even if the Military Forces count on precise weapons that such action is reliable, intelligence

³⁰ D. Plesch, «How to Start an Arms Race», *The New Statesman*, December 11, 2006, p. 12

³¹ D. Macrae, «Re-thinking deterrence?» *Interavia Business & Technology*, Vol. 58 Issue 673 (2003), p. 5

³² R. Jervis, «The Confrontation Between Iraq and the US: Implications for Theory and Practice of Deterrence» pp. 319-320

³³ D.S. McDonough, (2006), p. 75

about the whereabouts of all nuclear elements to be destroyed might not be complete, leaving an open window for retaliation. In the case of Iran, an unnamed Pentagon adviser stated that «the Iranians have distributed their nuclear activity very well and we have no clue where some of the key stuff is, it could even be out of the country».³⁴

As stated by Waltz, the highest probability of an attack is during the first stage of the developments, but even then there is a degree of uncertainty on how advanced might the programme be. The situation could then be just a postponement of the acquisition of nuclear power, to be solved only through ground invasion, occupation, and regime change. Is the United States really willing to conduct such an operation after the Iraqi mess?

Similarly, retaliation would make of the attack a disaster for the US and international order. Whether nuclear capabilities may be extinct, conventional and unconventional non-nuclear responses could be given. As stated by an unnamed Pentagon adviser «bombing Iran could provoke a chain reaction of attacks on American facilities and citizens throughout the world. What will 1.2 billion Muslims think the day we attack Iran?»³⁵ Scott Peterson from the *Christian Science Monitor* journal argues: «Iranian networks in Iraq and Afghanistan could imperil US interests there; American forces throughout the Gulf region could be targeted by asymmetric methods and lethal rocket barrages; and Iranian partners across the region – such as Hezbollah in Lebanon – could be mobilized to engage in an anti-US fight.»³⁶

In a similar direction Magnus Ranstorp at the Center for Asymmetric Threat Studies at the Swedish National Defense College in Stockholm, states:

«If you attack Iran you are unleashing a firestorm of reaction internally that will only strengthen revolutionary forces, and externally in the region. It's a nightmare scenario for any contingency planner, and I think you really enter the twilight zone if you strike Iran.»³⁷

THE OBAMA CHALLENGE

The Bush Administration is now gone, but as long as President Barack Obama does not change its policies, the outcome will remain the same. The White House has sent several messages in Foreign and Security Policy that could reduce the threat that America's nuclear vision implies for the

³⁴ S. Hearsh, (2006) Accessed in June 9, 2007.

³⁵ S. Hearsh, (2006) Accessed in June 9, 2007

³⁶ S. Peterson, «How Iran would retaliate if it comes to war» in *The Christian Science Monitor*, June 20, 2008. Online en: <http://www.csmonitor.com/2008/0620/p07s04-wome.html>. Accessed in June 25, 2009.

³⁷ S. Peterson, (Ibidem) June 20, 2008.

international system and for some particular states, as analysed before. Of course, messages must be transformed in actions in order for the outcome to become real.

A step in a right direction was Obama's recent decision to call off the Eastern European elements of the missile shield proposed during the Bush Administration in favour of a more flexible and mobile system that includes the use of nuclear submarines. Although the move generated widespread reclamations in Poland, where significant political capital was wasted in order to obtain the approval for the missile programme, evidently for Russia the significance is positive on the bilateral relation. But many of the issues regarding Obama's Nuclear and Defense Policies are still to be resolved for the next Quadrennial Defense Review to be released in 2010. Obama's apathy towards the shield could be seen even before the formal termination of the plan. The NMD budget for 2010 was reduced to \$9.3 billion, \$1.2 billion below fiscal 2009 levels.³⁸

Similarly, there have been positive advances regarding the US – Russia disarming process. The Bush Administration's withdrawal from the Anti Ballistic Missile Treaty generated widespread rejection in Russia, to the point where the bilateral disarming process was seemingly to collapse after the termination of the START Treaty in December 2010. The Obama's Administration has already started negotiation with the Russians for the continuation of this process once the START reaches its end.

If these two powers give legitimacy to their disarmament discourse, there might be motivation for other actors to follow suit; this, of course, if crisis with the potential to escalate tensions between powers do not arise or remain under relative control. For example, the status of Taiwan, that could spur tensions between China and the United States.

Likewise, its position to engage Iran, if positive, could have a significant outcome in the nuclear issue that could even seed values and principles of non-reliance in nuclear arsenals and a basis for an understanding of a nuclear-free world, which after all is what Obama's discourse preaches. The establishment of relations between the United States, European powers and Iran, could significantly reduce the perception of mutual threats permitting either a total abandonment of a nuclear programme or the establishment of a peaceful programme with full compliance of international requirements and with acceptance of Western powers and Israel.

As stated by Russian Deputy Defense Minister Vladimir Popovkin, «As far as I know, today's U.S. Administration has somewhat different plans, they have become more down to earth and more realistic.»³⁹

³⁸ M. Matishak, «Senators Question US Nuclear Defense Strategy» in *Nuclear Threat Initiative*. June 17, 2009. Online in: http://www.globalsecuritynewswire.org/gsn/nw_20090617_3627.php. Accessed in June 24, 2009.

³⁹ Nuclear Threat Initiative, «Russia wants U.S. to reject Space-Based Missile Defense» in *Global Security Newswire*, June 19, 2009. Online in: http://www.globalsecuritynewswire.org/gsn/nw_20090618_3303.php. Accessed in: Jun 30, 2009.

CONCLUSION

The United States modernization of its nuclear policy, materialized through the new nuclear triad represents a challenge for international stability and security, maybe even more than that posed by nuclear wannabes. It might be said that its reliance on nuclear weapons and its vertical proliferation actions generate a bigger impact for the international system than weak states in their intention to acquire nuclear capabilities, not only because they legitimate the role of this weapons in military strategy, but because they force others to follow suit.

On the other hand, a pre-emptive attack by the United States to any rogue country could not only represent a significant disruption to regional order, but could also destabilize the relations among powers worldwide. It could mean a period of tensions with Russia, China and other western powers depending on the context. Allies like France and Britain might take some distance; and it might push states like Germany and Japan to join the nuclear club.

As a consequence, when analysing the sources of threat and instability for global order and international security emanating from nuclear dynamics, together with nuclear proliferation which allows new states to become nuclear-capable, it is necessary to consider the systemic and direct implications of the modernization of nuclear arsenals and policies of the United States, and other nuclear powers, to have a complete panorama of the nuclear realities.

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