

Fuel for the Fire: Tactical Nuclear Weapons and Terrorism

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By Alastair Miller

I. Introduction

The following essay is by Alistair Millar, vice president and Director of the Washington Office of the Fourth Freedom Forum, a private Research foundation with offices in Indiana, Rhode Island and Washington, DC. Miller discusses the possible use of tactical nuclear weapons in fighting terrorism. He warns that the potential for civilian casualties even by low-yield, earth-penetrating nuclear weapons would be enormous. He cautions that attempts to find a "usable" role for nuclear weapons will undermine nonproliferation goals.

II. Essay By Alastair Miller

Fuel for the Fire: Tactical Nuclear Weapons and Terrorism

By Alistair Millar

In the aftermath of the attacks on the World Trade Center and the Pentagon on September 11th, the United States has been recruiting allies and new-found friends in an effort to formulate options for any retaliatory strikes. U.S. Defense Secretary Donald Rumsfeld has noted that retaliation will be "unconventional," citing the use of special forces and other less traditional means of dealing with a new type of enemy that is characterized by elusiveness. He also refused to rule out the possibility that an arsenal of tactical nuclear weapons could be used as a component in what has been declared as a war against terrorism. Larry Johnson, a former terrorism expert at the State Department, has joined a growing chorus of analysts who have elaborated on that point in the aftermath of this tragedy by noting that "the options are everything from conventional air strikes to cruise missiles up to and including tactical nuclear weapons."

The term tactical nuclear weapon refers to a broad array of atomic explosive weapons. These range

from so-called nuclear landmines and nuclear artillery shells to air-dropped or missile-launched nuclear warheads. The yields of such weapons range from being relatively low (0.1 KT) to being higher than those of the bombs dropped on Hiroshima and Nagasaki. The type of tactical nuclear weapon that has been recommended for optional use as part of the response to the September 2001 terrorist attacks on the United States would be an earth-penetrating, or "bunker buster" weapon.

Any U.S. response involving even the use of tactical nuclear weapons has far-reaching and serious negative consequences and should be rejected.

First, the use of such a weapon is being suggested because it would allow the U.S. to reach Saddam Hussein and Usama bin Laden who are assumed to be hiding in deeply buried underground bunkers. Some outspoken defense analysts that strongly influence US policy incorrectly assert that targeting them with earth-penetrating nuclear weapons with smaller blast yields would not harm innocent civilians.

"The use of any nuclear weapon capable of destroying a buried target that is otherwise immune to conventional attack will necessarily produce enormous numbers of civilian casualties," writes Dr. Robert Nelson, a professor of theoretical science at Princeton University, in a recent study for the Federation of American Scientists. "No earth-burrowing missile can penetrate deep enough in the earth to contain an explosion with a nuclear yield even as small as 1 percent of the 15-kiloton Hiroshima weapon. The explosion simply blows out a crater of radioactive dirt, which rains down on the local region with an especially intense and deadly fallout."

The blast from one of these weapons with even the lowest yield would "knock down nearly all homes and apartments--and kill nearly all the people in them--out to distances of greater than half a mile from the blast," says Greg Mello, director of the Los Alamos Study Group, a nuclear weapons policy research and education group based in Santa Fe. Those within this area who survived the blast would suffer a lethal dose of radiation, he predicts. "To take a specific example," says Mello, "if the target in question were the Iraqi presidential bunker located in south-central Baghdad, there would be very roughly 20,000 people located within one-half mile of this target." Whatever the yield of such weapons, their use would not only cause massive loss of human life, but also long-term contamination of soil, water tables, and atmosphere, and destruction of flora and fauna.

Second, tactical nuclear weapons pose unique dangers as weapons of terror. Their often-smaller size increases their portability and vulnerability to theft by nonnuclear states and potential nuclear terrorists. Characteristics of command unique to TNWs--such as predelegated launch authorization, and often inadequate safeguards, i.e., ineffective permissive action links--add to their potential unauthorized, accidental, or illicit use. A nuclear detonation in New York, Washington, or elsewhere would produce devastation exponentially worse than the incomprehensible destruction we are coping with now. Beyond the tremendous initial damage, rescue efforts in the tragic aftermath would be made utterly impossible because of nuclear contamination.

Third, tactical nuclear weapons contribute to a dangerous notion that there are "useable nukes," lowering the overall nuclear threshold and undermining efforts toward nonproliferation.

Despite these concerns, calls for the development of these new classes of nuclear weapons in the United States have emerged, largely from analysts at U.S. nuclear weapons labs. For example, while in his former position at Sandia, U.S. Director of Threat Reduction, Stephen Younger, argued in support of the feasibility and operational usefulness of these so-called mini-nukes. According to Younger, these low-yield nuclear warheads would be deployed on specially configured earth-penetrating bombs or missiles to target deeply buried or hardened underground targets, such as bunkers and bomb shelters.

Indeed, the U.S. Congress has even taken some initiative in exploring the development of these weapons for deployment in U.S. armed services. Republican Senators John Warner of Virginia and Wayne Allard of Colorado have added a provision to the 2001 Defense Authorization Bill that requires the Departments of Energy and Defense to conduct a new study on the use of nuclear weapons for the primary purpose of destroying "hard and deeply buried targets." The study may lead to the nullification of a current congressional prohibition led by Representatives Elizabeth Furse, (D-OR) and John Spratt Jr., (D-SC). The Furse-Spratt provision to the fiscal year 1994 Defense Authorization Bill prohibited nuclear laboratories from research that could lead to the development of a low- yield nuclear weapon.

These lawmakers have recognized the dangers of plans that signal the intent to develop or use such weapons, and acknowledge the possibility of a nuclear backlash against the United States following the use of such weapons. They also recognize the incentive these plans would give to other countries to develop nuclear weapons of their own, adding to the problem of increased proliferation. These sentiments are summarized in a statement by Rep. Mike Thompson (CA), who warns that the problem with

developing such a weapon is that it is likely to encourage military and political leaders to think more readily about using nuclear weapons. In my view, we should not lower this threshold or make nuclear weapons a more acceptable choice in war. In addition, development of such a weapon is contrary to our Nation's goals of reducing and eventually eliminating nuclear weapons. To begin development and stockpiling of a new nuclear weapon would reverse the difficult achievements the United States has made to slow the proliferation of nuclear material and weapons.

Efforts underway from Senator Warner to overturn Furse-Spratt in order to resume testing and development of "low-yield" nuclear weapons, should therefore be viewed as a potentially destabilizing.

Would Decision-Makers Actually Call on the Use of TNWs?

TNWs could have been employed in combat in several instances in the past, but policymakers and military decision-makers decided against their use. Most notably, during the Korean War the United States faced several factors that would have potentially justified the use of TNWs but opted against doing so. Meanwhile, in other military conflicts, such as Vietnam and Chechnya, decision makers have exercised restraint when TNWs could have been options. In today's context this fact further calls into the question the validity of maintaining an arsenal of TNWs at all. As the argument for their political use has been weakened in the post Cold War era by a greater need to stem proliferation by reducing the political currency derived from nuclear weapons, it is doubtful that they will ever be used by a state party to the NPT.

Recently, pundits and former government officials have called for a role for TNWs in the wake of the 11 Septembers terrorist attacks, yet at the same time, the government is placing a premium on the need for stronger international cooperation. One response to recent calls from those commentators and from US weapons labs for a leaner, more usable U.S. nuclear weapons arsenal, suggests that the domestic and international political fallout of a U.S. decision to use TNWs would be so extreme as to make the costs of a decision to use them too high. In addition to being a devastating rejection of international norms, U.S. global moral leadership would be thoroughly undermined and would "provide a potent focus for simmering anti-U.S. resentments around the world," undermining U.S. national security over the long run.

A forthcoming U.S. Nuclear Posture Review, due to be completed by congressional mandate by the end of the year, will likely call for the development and deployment of bunker buster weapons. The

Department of Defense and Department of Energy study will most likely echo this finding, advocating that the U.S. develops new classes of tactical nuclear weapons, if for nothing more, than to be used in the current "war on terrorists."

For the past 34 years, nuclear nonproliferation policies have established a framework of norms that have helped to prevent a nuclear attack of terror. The United States has been a leader in preventing the spread of nuclear weapons in the past, by pledging to reduce and eventually eliminate its nuclear weapons. It has signed treaties and successfully encouraged other nations to forswear their nuclear programs. Bending to temptation to threaten to use nuclear weapons will undermine years of work to prevent the spread of nuclear weapons. This is at a time when American vulnerability to terror attacks has never been more clear.

The multilateral spirit of resolve and cooperation expressed in the international community should be seized as a means to expand upon nations' similarly mutual interests of nonproliferation. Among all the things that September 11 becomes in our minds, it should also serve as a profound reminder of the importance of these efforts at nuclear arms control. Right now, the United States is joined by nations of the world in reeling at the horror of what has taken place, and generous offers of cooperation and shared commitment to stem terrorism. This should serve as a startling reminder of the need to continue to work at multilateral, cooperative efforts at arms control. A policy of reliance on and development of new bombs, including tactical nuclear weapons, will destroy any hope of meaningful cooperation with a world community that shares our concerns and vulnerabilities.

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