3 June 1980

NPG Presentation on Strategic Employment Doctrine

I would like briefly to address our strategic nuclear employment doctrine, which is designed to maximize deterrence of attack on either the US or our allies.

-- Employment Doctrine is of course only one part of our overall strategic policy, which also embraces our force modernization programs -- covered in detail at our prior meeting -- by which we seek to assure continued essential equivalence and the capability which must underlie any employment doctrine, and which probably has the greatest impact on Soviet calculations and, therefore, on deterrence.

-- One of the major policy efforts of the Administration has been a review and restatement of our doctrine on employment of strategic nuclear weapons. Several public statements have been made already and I expect a formal directive by the President within a month or two.

-- Meantime, it is appropriate to outline briefly both what is new and what is constant in our approach.

The Doctrine

Our fundamental objective is and remains deterrence -- but not just of massive attacks on US cities.

-- We need to insure that our strategic nuclear forces contribute to deterrence of the full range of possible attacks, both on the US and its forces and on our allies. We need to consider how to disabuse the Soviets of any belief that a large-scale but still limited conventional or nuclear exchange -- especially one focussed on military targets -- could work to their advantage. In particular, we need to have forces and plans such as to convince the Soviet leadership that in reality they could not win a nuclear war, whether or not they believe that such wars are in theory winnable by those who have on their side the alleged historical inevitability of the triumph of socialism.

-- This is what I have referred to as a countervailing strategy.

-- Its fundamental feature is the proposition that in an age of strategic parity, deterrence, over the full range of contingencies of concern, requires that we have forces, and plans for their use, such that the USSR would recognize that no plausible outcome of aggression would represent victory by any plausible definition of victory.

-- A doctrine focussing on how nuclear weapons could deny Soviet victory over a broad range of situations is especially important in the Alliance context, because our doctrine for nuclear forces -- including central strategic forces -- must be consistent with and supportive of our proclaimed willingness to use nuclear weapons, first if necessary, if conventional defense fails.

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-- To this end we need plans for battlefield use and for relatively limited use of nuclear weapons -- generally up to a few tens of weapons -- the LNO's and SEP's such as those on which we will be briefed shortly.

-- But, in addition, to cover the whole range of possibilities we must also have plans and capabilities to use strategic nuclear forces in larger, but still less than all-out strikes. Deterrence, by definition depends on shaping Soviet predictions of the consequences of a war -- and making clear that the result of war will be either frustration in achieving their objectives or unacceptable costs, that is costs out of proportion to any gains. We must therefore make clear to the USSR that, even short of total destruction from all-out war, if they choose some intermediate level of nuclear escalation, we could by more limited attacks exact an unacceptably high cost from the things the Soviets value most -- political and military control, military forces both nuclear and conventional, and the industrial and economic capacity to sustain military operations.

-- Concurrently to deter all-out Soviet attacks and to serve as a continuing deterrent to escalation and coercion -- and, indeed, to contribute to deterrence of any attack -- we need a survivable and enduring capability that is sufficient to attack a broader set of industrial and economic targets.

Steps to Implement

This requires some changes in our strategic war plans, especially introduction of more flexibility, i.e., a larger variety of preplanned attack alternatives. These changes will permit us to use more effectively the inherent capabilities that advances such as MIRVs and ALCMs give our forces for flexibility in employment.

-- Work to this end is now going on. New plan revisions will provide significantly more options for our central strategic forces.

-- In general, the new options will be oriented toward increasing our preplanned capability to strike with more discrimination at militarily significant subsets of the total target system. These options will, in general, be considerably larger than the LNOs and SEPs, and correspondingly more destructive.

-- We are also acting to improve our ability to conduct a sustained exchange, which requires improved endurance in our forces, especially in their C3I support, and special attention to the role of strategic forces held in reserve.

Not a new Departure

-- This recognition of the need for flexibility, and for effective targeting of military and control targets, not just Soviet cities and industry, is not new. We have never had an employment policy based simply on massive attacks on Soviet cities. Instead, we have always targeted military and control installations, including those that pose a special threat to our Allies. Alliance discussions of nuclear doctrine have recognized explicitly the limits of a pure "anti-city" strategy.

No Illusions

-- It should be clearly understood that in statements of our doctrine in terms of an ability to prevent Soviet victory in a relatively prolonged series of less than maximum exchanges, we fully appreciate the limitations of the theory.

-- We have no illusions that a large scale nuclear war could be either:

--- A sensible deliberate instrument of US or Alliance policy, or a means of attaining victory for ourselves. Nor can any theory of employing nuclear weapons compensate for conventional force weakness. Improving conventional forces remains vital to effective deterrence, and to defense.

--- Nor are we unaware of the immense uncertainties. We recognize that what started as a demonstration or even a controlled attack for larger purposes could well escalate to a full-scale exchange. And even the large scale, though less than maximum, attacks contemplated in our new options would involve very high casualties.

-- Nonetheless, it is legitimate and important to plan for the possibility of such exchanges:

--- We must deter Soviet actions, and their views of the risks and of what costs are unacceptable may differ from our own. There is some reason to believe that the Soviet leadership -- or at least some of them -- believe that the Soviet leadership -- or at least some of them -- believe a nuclear war need not be a spasm all-out exchange against all targets; but could be focussed chiefly on military and control targets and occur over a period of time. Moreover, they appear to take the possibility of victory in such a war quite seriously. We cannot afford to ignore their mind sets even if we think they are unrealistic. We need to have and make clear we have, forces and a doctrine that make such a Soviet mind set unrealistic.

This is the essence of our countervailing strategy: to deny the Soviets any meaningful hope of victory in nuclear war, however they may define victory, and at whatever level of intensity and scope the conflict might be fought. By doing this we will best deter them from actions which could lead to war. Our ability to do this would, if war came, also give us the best possibility of ending the war on acceptable terms before both sides were reduced to ruin. This objective sets a high standard, and one which I believe we will continue to meet, both by our nuclear modernizaton programs, which increase the potential of our forces, and by our planning to exploit that potential if needed.

I want to assure you today that these evolutionary alterations of our strategy are designed to be fully supportive of NATO strategy to promote deterrence, enhance flexibility and strengthen the defenses of the Alliance. I expect to be discussing developments regularly with you in future meetings.