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OPINION

Monday, February 23, 2004

Administration favors nuclear free-for-all

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The next nuclear bomb used for war, because of changes in deployment and proximity to new Asian targets, likely will be delivered by a Puget Sound-based Trident submarine.

For the past 40 years, U.S. Navy ballistic missile submarines were deployed as a deterrent to nuclear war. The potential for provoking a full-scale nuclear exchange was too terrifying to consider the limited use of nuclear weapons.

New U.S. war-fighting plans and the promotion of more useable nuclear weapons will affect the deployment of the Trident submarine system. Most notable is the doctrine of pre-emptive first strike, where any nation considered a threat to the United States could be attacked.

In December 2001, the U.S. Nuclear Posture Review called for the development of new tactical nuclear weapons and a resumption of nuclear tests. The review claimed, "Many buried targets could be attacked using a weapon with a much lower [nuclear] yield than would be required with a surface burst." The report also called for more "flexible, adaptable strike plans," including "options for variable and reduced yields, high accuracy and timely employment."

The Bush administration favors a nuclear free-for-all, confident that it will be able to intimidate or destroy all adversaries with a varied arsenal of increasingly sophisticated weapons. Numerous international arms-control treaties, including the Anti-Ballistic Missile Treaty, the Comprehensive Test Ban Treaty and the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty, have been abandoned or ignored by the United States.

In November, Congress approved an administration request for continued research on nuclear earth-penetrators and a new generation of tactical nuclear weapons for possible use against terrorists or so-called rogue states such as Iran or North Korea. By doing so, Congress and the administration repealed a 10-year-old ban on research for the development of new nuclear weapons with yields less than five kilotons, often referred to as bunker-busters or "mininukes."

A Dec. 5 memo from Linton F. Brooks, of the National Nuclear Security Administration, to the three U.S. nuclear weapons laboratories, stated, "We are now free to explore a range of technical options that could strengthen our ability to deter, or respond to new or emerging threats without any concern that some ideas could inadvertently violate a vague and arbitrary limitation." Addressing new endorsements by Congress and the repeal of the ban on low-yield nuclear weapons development, Brooks stated, "We should not fail to take advantage of this opportunity."

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The Trident missile system has been studied and tested for use with a conventional (non-nuclear) warhead. Also discussed by war planners is the delivery of a low-yield nuclear weapon by a Trident missile.

While specific issues addressing the delivery of small nuclear weapons have been kept secret, there are numerous reasons war planners would choose the Trident delivery system, including high accuracy, speed of delivery and 4,500-mile range for the missiles.

A Trident missile can reach its target in 10-15 minutes, much faster than land-based ballistic missiles, aircraft or cruise missiles. The speed of the missile and high trajectory also provide the burrowing effect desired for bunker-buster bombs.

The secrecy of submarine deployment further advances the use of Trident missiles in a tactical strike. The delivery would not encroach upon the airspace of hostile nations. Those targeted likely would never know the missile was coming.

Nuclear weapons, even ones smaller than used on Hiroshima or Nagasaki, will kill on impact and create a surrounding firestorm. The resulting radioactive dust will cause slow and agonizing death.

With the advancement of tactical nuclear weapons we must ask ourselves, who will give the order to launch? Should we let them?

On Jan. 17, 2004, 12 people were arrested while blocking the entrance to the Trident submarine base at Bangor. The next planned non-violent action at Bangor, on May 8, will honor Mother's Day.

Glen Milner lives in Seattle and is a member of Ground Zero Center for Nonviolent Action in Poulsbo; www.gzcenter.org



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