



FUNDAMENTALS OF NUCLEAR OPERATIONS

Last Updated: 18 December 2020

The end of the Cold War has had a major impact on the role of nuclear weapons in US national security strategies. Tensions between former Cold War adversaries were reduced following the collapse of the Soviet Union. This, coupled with advances in technology, enabled arms control treaties to bring about dramatic nuclear force reductions. However, so long as nuclear weapons exist, the possibility of their use remains. Today, the strategic environment is becoming very complex, aggravated by increasingly aggressive behavior of adversaries, nuclear modernization or recapitalization, and the persistent threat of nuclear proliferation. While the prospect of a massive nuclear exchange seems remote, the potential still exists. For this reason, nuclear weapons are just as important now as they have ever been.

The Air Force may need to develop new concepts, systems, and procedures in response to changes in US nuclear policy. For instance, the concepts of “mutual assured destruction” and “flexible response” required the Air Force to employ multiple weapon systems, different plans, and differing degrees of survivability for command and control systems. Because US policy on employing nuclear weapons to respond to an adversary’s battlefield use of [weapons of mass destruction](#) (WMD) is purposely vague, the Air Force must be prepared to respond in a wide variety of ways with the nuclear forces required by the combatant commander and approved by the President of the United States. The ambiguous nature of US policy makes it difficult for an adversary to predict how the US may respond, or to assume such a response would not be forthcoming. Even though there is no guarantee nuclear force would be used in response to a WMD attack, planners are responsible for making alternative options available for civilian policymakers.

To maintain credibility, Airmen must be ready at all times to respond to requests from the President and his or her advisors via the Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff to employ nuclear weapons. The inability of nuclear forces to respond quickly could undermine the value of deterrence and assurance.

The employment of nuclear weapons is normally considered a form of strategic attack. Strategic attack is “**offensive action specifically selected to achieve national strategic objectives. These attacks seek to weaken the adversary’s ability or will**

to engage in or escalate conflict, and may achieve strategic objectives without necessarily having to achieve operational objectives as a precondition” (AFDP 3-70, [Strategic Attack](#)). Strategic attack is intended to accomplish national, multinational, or theater strategic-level objectives without necessarily engaging an enemy’s fielded military forces. However, this does not preclude operations to destroy the enemy’s fielded forces if required to accomplish strategic national objectives.

The employment of nuclear weapons at any level requires explicit orders from the President. The nature of nuclear weapons, overwhelmingly more significant than conventional weapons, is such that their use can produce political and psychological effects well beyond their actual physical effects. The employment of nuclear weapons may lead to such unintended consequences as escalation of the current conflict or long-term deterioration of relations with other countries. For this reason above all others, the decision whether or not to use nuclear weapons will always be a political decision and not a military one.
