



CURTIS E. LEMAY CENTER

FOR DOCTRINE DEVELOPMENT AND EDUCATION



ANNEX 3-72 NUCLEAR OPERATIONS

FUNDAMENTALS OF NUCLEAR OPERATIONS

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The end of the Cold War has had a major impact on the perceived utility and role of [nuclear weapons](#) in the United States. Reduced tensions between former Cold War adversaries had reduced the specter of a large-scale, Cold War-type nuclear exchange enabling force reductions; however, as long as nuclear weapons exist, the possibility of their use remains. This risk is aggravated as some state- and non-state actors seek to acquire new capabilities while others modernize and recapitalize existing nuclear systems. Thus, while the prospect of a massive nuclear exchange seems remote, the potential for a limited nuclear attack has actually grown. For this reason, nuclear weapons are as important as they have ever been.

US nuclear policy is not static and is shaped by numerous considerations. As the civilian leadership changes US policy due to new threats or technologies, the Air Force will need to develop new concepts, systems, and procedures. For instance, the concepts of “mutual assured destruction” and “flexible response” required different types of weapons, different plans, and different degrees of survivability for [command and control](#) systems. Stated policies also affect the ability to deter an enemy. As an example, US policy on using nuclear weapons to respond to an adversary’s battlefield use of weapons of mass destruction (WMD) is purposely vague. The ambiguous nature of US policy makes it impossible for an enemy to assume such a response would not be forthcoming. Even though there is no guarantee nuclear force would be used to respond to a WMD attack, planners are responsible for making alternative options available for civilian policymakers.

Physical employment of nuclear weapons should remain an option for the United States. To maintain credibility, actual employment should be a plausible consideration in certain circumstances. Without that possibility, the value of deterrence and assurance will likely be undermined.

The employment of nuclear weapons is normally considered a form of [strategic attack](#). Strategic attack is defined as “**offensive action specifically selected to achieve national strategic objectives. These attacks seek to weaken the adversary’s ability or will to engage in conflict, and may achieve strategic objectives without necessarily having to achieve operational objectives as a precondition.**” 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.
