

The US is planning

NUCLEAR WAR PT.1/2

a nuclear war.





In the morning of August 6th, 1945, the US dropped an atomic bomb (named “little boy”) on the Japanese city of Hiroshima. The centre of the blast reached several million degrees centigrade, disintegrating all human tissue. All that remained of these people were shadows burnt into stone.

Three days later, the US dropped another nuclear bomb (named “fat man”) on another Japanese city, Nagasaki. It is estimated that up to 210,000 people died in Hiroshima and Nagasaki by December 1945,* over 95% of which were civilians.

80 years later, the US is once again preparing to use nuclear weapons →

* This does not include long-term mortality from radiation-related cancer and other illnesses.

The Cold War Begins

The prevailing narrative is that the US used nuclear weapons to force Japan's surrender, preventing a US' military invasion that could have killed hundreds of thousands of people. But this is misleading.

In reality, the US dropped atomic bombs on Hiroshima and Nagasaki in order to ward off a Soviet offensive in Japan, and more broadly, to demonstrate a show of force against the Soviet Union (USSR).

The nuclear bombing of Hiroshima and Nagasaki was less about ending World War II than it was about starting the Cold War.*

* The Cold War pitted the US-led capitalist bloc against the USSR and the rest of the socialist bloc. It lasted from 1945 until the USSR collapsed in 1991.

Sources: Bellamy Foster, Monthly Review (2024); Hudson, CND (2013).

Image: After the explosion of the atom bomb in August 1945, Hiroshima, Japan. Getty Images.



Countervalue

The US nuclear monopoly did not last long. By 1949, the USSR had developed its own atomic bomb, and by 1953, its own hydrogen bomb. This effectively eliminated the US' ability to use nuclear weapons against the USSR. Any first strike would trigger immediate second-strike retaliation, leading to "mutually assured destruction," or MAD.

From the 1960s to 1980s, MAD was the dominant nuclear doctrine in the US. Nuclear weapons were positioned against enemy cities, or "countervalue targets," acting as a deterrent for any direct military confrontation between the US and USSR.

Counterforce

But the US was never content with countervalue. It has long sought a nuclear doctrine based on “counterforce,” which was advocated for by nuclear maximalists like former US National Security Advisor Henry Kissinger.

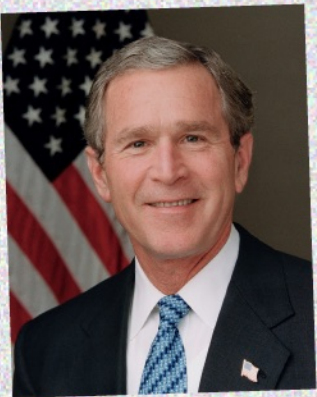


The objective of counterforce is to develop a “first-strike capability” that can wipe out an enemy’s nuclear-weapons system, preventing nuclear retaliation. This doctrine also embraces the idea of “limited nuclear war,” in which tactical nuclear weapons can be used on the battlefield, as opposed to strategic nuclear weapons designed for hitting cities.

At its core, counterforce is about making nuclear weapons usable.

Nuclear Primacy

After the collapse of the Soviet Union in 1991, the US fully embraced counterforce as its nuclear doctrine. Attaining nuclear primacy became essential to its quest for preserving its unipolar dominance of the world. The commitment to counterforce spanned both Republican and Democratic administrations:



George W. Bush unilaterally withdrew the US from the 1972 Anti-Ballistic Missile Treaty, paving the way for an expansion of missile defense systems in California, Alaska, and Europe. Missile defense systems are key to counterforce because they increase the capacity to intercept stray missiles that might have survived a first-strike attack.



Barack Obama initiated a thirty-year, \$1 trillion upgrade to the US nuclear arsenal in line with a counterforce strategy. This includes developing new Intercontinental Ballistic Missiles (ICBMs), ballistic missile submarines, B-21 stealth bombers, and nuclear warhead production facilities.



Donald Trump unilaterally withdrew from the 1987 Intermediate-Range Nuclear Forces Treaty and 2002 Treaty on Open Skies. For the first time in US nuclear grand strategy, Trump's 2018 *National Defense Strategy* included preparation for limited nuclear war.



Joe Biden oversaw the January 2023 shipment of B61-12 nuclear weapons to Europe. The B61-12 is considered to be "the most dangerous nuclear weapon in America's arsenal" because of its dual use as a strategic first-strike and tactical battlefield weapon. Its upper-level yield is three times that of the atomic bomb dropped on Hiroshima.

The US' advancement towards nuclear primacy set off alarm bells in its main geopolitical adversaries: Russia and China. Their policy responses have varied →

Russia's Nuclear Doctrine

To protect its deterrence capacity, Russia has focused on developing new hypersonic missiles with the capacity to evade US missile defense systems. In 2018, Russia completed a successful test of its hypersonic missile “Avangard,” which was able to zig-zag for 6,000 km across Siberia at Mach 27 (27x the speed of sound).

In 2024, Russia reduced its nuclear-use threshold. Russia's nuclear-use doctrine now states that it “reserves the right” to use nuclear weapons in case of a nuclear attack or a conventional military attack that poses a “critical threat” to its “sovereignty” or that of its ally, Belarus.

This policy change is connected to the ongoing proxy war in Ukraine, which is being waged by the US and NATO.



China's Nuclear Doctrine

Like Russia, China has invested in developing hypersonic missile capacity, which it views as an “assassin's mace” against the better-resourced US-American opponent.

However, unlike Russia, China does not have a first-strike policy. Since its first nuclear test in 1964, China has held the position that it “will never at any time under any circumstances be the first to use nuclear weapons.”

China's nuclear doctrine is firmly focused on MAD, despite having the technical capacity to build a counterforce arsenal. Its nuclear weapons are kept on off-alert status, with nuclear warheads not mated with missiles. However, it now has a nuclear submarine at sea at all times, which has been part of its nuclear modernisation efforts.

As US hegemony continues to decline relative to a rising China, the risk of a nuclear first strike by the US will only increase. As John Bellamy Foster writes:

“The most likely result of the current Western view that nuclear weapons can be used to achieve political and military ends is that they will indeed end up being used, with the destruction of virtually all of humanity.”

In part 2 of 2 of this series on nuclear war, we will examine the fallout of nuclear armageddon.