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NSC for  
concerns NSSM/169  
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DATE: 07/09/85

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Copies to:

S/PC

PM

INR

To: The Secretary

From: S/PC - Winston Lord

December 3, 1973

*Hand paper -  
through 'dispute' with  
most of it*

NSSM 169--Nuclear Weapons Policy

Members of the Planning and Coordination Staff have been concerned about the study and draft NSDM resulting from NSSM 169. In my judgment their reservations deserve airing and I have encouraged them in preparing a memorandum on the subject.

Recently, we understand that you have concurred in issuing two separate papers -- a NSDM on nuclear employment policy and a NSSM for further study on nuclear acquisition policy. These apparently will provide for more high level review of new employment options and in other ways insure appropriate control of nuclear planning. These changes go a long way toward meeting our concerns over the NSSM 169 study and earlier draft NSDM.

Nevertheless, we still have reservations about the concept and policy of "controlled nuclear escalation" as developed in the NSSM 169 study and which the earlier draft NSDM seemed to endorse. We assume that the new draft will contain much the same language in this respect.

Therefore, I think that some of the thoughts and issues about the direction in which our nuclear policy might be moving are still pertinent. The attached comments elaborate these concerns. They address our approach to achieving nuclear flexibility and not the need for greater flexibility itself, which is not in dispute.

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In light of INR's recent memorandum to you on Soviet doctrine on nuclear escalation, these comments are especially timely. A copy of the INR memorandum is attached at Tab B for your reference.

Attachments:

Tab A - Memorandum regarding Nuclear Weapons Policy--  
NSSM 169 Study and Related NSDM.

Tab B - INR Memorandum, "Possible Changes in Soviet  
Planning for Theater Nuclear War,"  
November 23, 1973.

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Drafted: S/PC:FHPerez/VEGathright/BCAnderson:emb  
x28980:12/3/73 *Rw*

Copies: PM - Mr. Weiss  
INR/DDM - Mr. Denney

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MEMORANDUM

Subject: Nuclear Weapons Policy--  
NSSM 169 Study and Related NSDM

The NSSM 169 study advocates what it describes as a "major departure" in basic nuclear weapons policy--the adoption of a strategy of "controlled nuclear escalation".

This change was reflected in a resulting draft NSDM and is also incorporated in some detail in the current OSD "Policy and Planning Guidance" for FY 76-80 in anticipation of the approval of the NSSM 169 approach.

Although implementing steps are under way, the NSSM 169 study leaves unanswered many crucial questions concerning the implications of the "controlled nuclear escalation" concept. As viewed here, these implications include a possible adverse effect on deterrence, overreliance on nuclear forces, and overconfidence in the applicability of nuclear escalation in a wide variety of situations.

Deterrence

From the standpoint of deterrence, "controlled nuclear escalation" poses a fundamental question:

--Would deterrence be strengthened or weakened by adopting the concept?

Any effort to limit nuclear conflict with another nuclear power would presuppose the willingness of the other side to cooperate in some degree. However, the "controlled nuclear escalation" concept as advanced in the NSSM 169 study calls for layer upon layer of options. If these are intended to be meaningful at all, then it seems to follow that we would have to consider conveying to the Soviet Union well in advance some impression of the kind of game we were contemplating. The Soviets might then make changes in doctrine

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and capabilities which would permit them to fight a nuclear conflict more or less in phase with us if they should choose to do so.

The NSSM 169 study recognizes that our adoption of this approach "could be interpreted as a weakening of U.S. will..." The risk here is that deterrence could be weakened if Soviet leaders should become convinced that we were seeking to construct a wide variety of nuclear escape hatches. The study deals inconclusively with this problem.

Soviet leaders may reasonably doubt today whether we would be prepared to escalate to a massive nuclear exchange. However, the perceived risks and costs of attacking should be high since they are confronted with a substantial range of tactical and strategic nuclear capabilities and with an ambiguous situation as regards the way in which a conflict might evolve. They can't be sure that a conflict would not get out of hand and escalate--perhaps rapidly--to a major strategic exchange.

This uncertainty constitutes the core of deterrence under present circumstances. The burden of weighing the risks of initiating an attack falls on the leaders of the Soviet Union. The ambiguity of the situation confronting them should give them pause.

No concept, of course, will remove all elements of ambiguity. However, the dilemma of how much we should say in advance is illustrated in the recent discussion of tactical nuclear planning by the NATO Nuclear Planning Group:

--On the one hand, Secretary Schlesinger stressed the importance of confronting the Soviet Union with an ambiguous situation before a conflict began and the immediate need to remove ambiguity upon the outbreak of conflict.

--On the other hand, he reportedly agreed with Lord Carrington's view that the Alliance's declaratory statements should reflect an effort to persuade Soviet leaders that constraints on nuclear war are possible.

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This question of "persuading" the Soviets that nuclear war can be constrained has not been thought through. They might wind up being persuaded that we were so driven by the desire to limit risks that any strengthening of deterrence which ought to arise from a more flexible nuclear posture would be lost.

Nuclear Weapons Employment (War-Fighting)

The construction of additional nuclear options would give the President a range of choices short of massive SIOP options.

Conducting a limited strategic strike against Soviet territory would entail incalculable risks. However, in an extremity this might seem to offer the last chance of bringing the Soviet Union's leaders to their senses and effecting a ceasefire. Depending on the circumstances, the use of tactical nuclear weapons might serve the same purposes and entail a somewhat lower level of risk.

At whatever level nuclear conflict occurred, we would unquestionably want to try to keep it limited and bring it to a conclusion at the lowest possible level of damage to ourselves and our allies. In this sense an attempt to control escalation is inherent in any flexible policy.

The war-fighting concept advanced in the NSSM 169 study is far more elaborate than this. Although recognizing that there is "no guarantee that escalation can be controlled", the study argues that "limiting damage through the control of nuclear escalation...appears to be a promising approach..." The intellectual basis for this approach rests on the assumption that an adversary will have a cost/benefit ratio that we can manipulate to our advantage through controlled escalation.

This basic assumption of mirror-image logic and the consequent reliance on the "rationality" of an adversary is highly questionable. But even if cost/benefit ratios existed in some meaningful sense, we would have no way of estimating his ratio or of knowing in advance whether he might not better manipulate ours to his advantage by the same tactics.

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5 USC 532  
(b)(1);  
E.O. 12358  
1.3 (a)(1)

There is an obvious need to prepare to use nuclear weapons in situations where this might prove essential.

such situations are probably far more limited than implied by the study which comes very close to regarding the use of nuclear weapons as routine.

One hazard of enshrining in national policy the theory advanced in the study is that preoccupation with constructing a large number of nuclear options to fit theoretical concepts could lead to an assumption that great reliance could in fact be placed on employing nuclear weapons in many contingencies. If this should lead to neglect of the development of adequate conventional options, the result would be to decrease the alternatives open to the President--to confront him with a choice between lowering the nuclear threshold or failing to act.

Soviet and Allied Reaction

The study summarizes traditional Soviet views, including their rejection of the notion of the limited use of nuclear weapons, and their apparent rejection of the possibility that either the U.S. or Soviet Union could exercise restraint once nuclear weapons had been employed against their respective homelands.

In the event of nuclear war, the Soviet Union might, of course, act in a different way. However, there is no prospect of obtaining advance assurance of this. Signalling acceptance of the "controlled nuclear escalation" concept would not seem advantageous from the Soviet standpoint since it might encourage us to resort to the use of nuclear weapons earlier than might otherwise be the case.

But would we be likely to gain if the Soviet Union should adopt this concept? Do we really want it to acquire the capabilities and develop the doctrine which the concept envisages? Might not the Soviet Union have some advantages in playing a tit-for-tat nuclear game? If so, we would know it, they would know we knew it, and we might be more exploitable.

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There is further risk. Whether or not it accepted the "controlled escalation" concept, the Soviet Union could exploit politically the fact that we had adopted the concept.

5 USC 552  
(b)(1);  
E.O. 12356  
1.3(a)(5)

Conclusion

It is recognized that guidance is currently needed to establish a more flexible nuclear weapons policy. However, with the questions raised but left unanswered by the NSSM 169 study, a good case can be made that such guidance should not be tied to the concept of "controlled escalation." Even the use of the term in a NSDM might be construed by some as an endorsement of the concept as developed in the NSSM 169 study.

Moreover, a flexible nuclear posture and policy need not depend on the "controlled escalation" concept. A more modest alternative approach, which would not require a major departure from current policy, is suggested below:

--Without adopting the "controlled escalation" concept as such, a limited number of additional tactical and strategic nuclear options could be constructed. As regards strategic options, these would not be of a "city-busting" character although it remains to be seen what targets can be identified which would entail the lowest risk of generating a massive response.

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--Without departing from current policy statements it could then be made known (subtly and indirectly, but unmistakably) that our forces and command and control structure allow the President wide flexibility in the application of nuclear forces at all levels to meet aggression. This should increase the ambiguity of the situation confronting the Soviets.

Leaving aside for the moment whether such options--especially limited strategic options--should in fact be invoked, awareness of the availability of additional flexibility to the President could further complicate Soviet assessments of risks and add to their burden of uncertainty. This might strengthen deterrence as long as there is no effort to persuade the Soviets that the purpose of increased flexibility is to reduce our risks rather than increase theirs.

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