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FOREIGN RELATIONS OF THE UNITED STATES, 1977–1980, VOLUME IV, NATIONAL SECURITY POLICY

36. Memorandum From the President's Assistant for National Security Affairs (Brzezinski) to President Carter¹

Washington, undated

SUBJECT

Secretary Brown's Response to Questions on Our Nuclear War Procedures and Doctrine

In the spring, in connection with a review of our "crisis management" procedures for the event of nuclear war, you asked Harold Brown to provide answers to questions about (1) procedures for the conduct of a limited nuclear war, (2) the survivability of our command and control under nuclear attack, and (3) the concept of "limited nuclear options" (LNOs). He has responded with a memorandum (Tab A), a report on our "Current Nuclear Weapons Employment Policy" (Tab B). I delayed an earlier version of his report pending the outcome of PRM–10, and this second response is his revision in light of [Page 157] PRM–10 and PD–18. (A copy of PD–18 is at Tab H.)²

The answers to the three original questions are succinctly stated at Tabs C, D, and E. The JCS separate answers are at Tab F.

- *Procedures.* You will quickly note that the procedure for a limited nuclear operation, [2 lines not declassified], is not very realistic, especially in view of the Soviet stated preference for targeting command and control at the beginning of a conflict.
- *Command and Control.* Communications for a retaliatory strike order may be very secure, but the survivability of the NCA for conducting the war over several days or weeks and for coping with the domestic civil front is not addressed.
- *Limited Nuclear Options.* The discussion of LNOs is less useful than the appended list of presently approved LNOs which our forces could execute.

To sum up, we have a limited nuclear war doctrine and targeting capability, but we seem to lack some of the defensive capabilities that would make it practical.

The longer report, "Current Nuclear Weapons Employment Policy," is an excellent essay explaining the historical process by which we arrived at our present condition, a doctrine but with only part of the capability to implement it. In particular, it recounts our changing views on what constitutes "deterrence" and how to "control escalation," if deterrence fails.

As Harold Brown points out in this memorandum, NSDM–242 specified a number of actions that have not been carried out effectively, and he recommends that we reemphasize them. (A copy of NSDM 242 is at Tab G).³ He invites you to hear a briefing on LNOs by the JCS and to visit SAC Headquarters in Omaha. I encourage you to accept these invitations because:

- As the report argues, and as NSDM 242 specified, LNOs and the SIOP require repeated interaction between the NCA and the planning process if our nuclear force planning is to reflect the policy preference of the NCA.

- The experience will improve your familiarity with the context in which our White House Emergency Procedures and IVORY ITEMS drills must fit. Recent press reporting on the subject of your readiness for handling a nuclear war emergency (Orr Kelly's piece in *U.S. News & World Report*)⁴ makes this a matter of potential public sensitivity, not only because [Page 158] our procedures are mentioned, but also because Brezhnev is described as practicing frequently with his nuclear war command and control system. Our OPAL drills, your NEACP trip, and the IVORY ITEM drill are already giant strides in this area of readiness in comparison to anything since the issuance of NSDM–242 which called for similar “exercises” that never took place.

Finally, I shall consult with Harold Brown on re-emphasizing neglected aspects of NSDM–242.⁵

Tab A

Memorandum From Secretary of Defense Brown to President Carter⁶

Washington, August 19, 1977

SUBJECT

US Nuclear Weapons Employment Policy (U)

(TS) Several months ago, you directed Zbigniew Brzezinski to ask me⁷ several questions concerning our current nuclear weapons employment policy (NSDM–242), and the appropriateness of retaining that policy. My response to your questions was initially forwarded to the White House on June 3.⁸ At that time, however, it was anticipated that PRM–10 would likely provide additional insight with respect to nuclear weapons employment questions. As a consequence, the report was held within the NSC awaiting completion of PRM–10. The report was returned to me on July 29 to permit whatever modifications necessary to accommodate my views on the results of PRM–10.

(TS) I have reviewed my previously developed responses to your questions, and am enclosing the report, slightly altered to the above end, for your information and consideration. In addition to responding to your specific questions, the report provides additional background to help in understanding our existing policy and the complexity of issues involving [Page 159] deterrence and the possible employment or threat of employment of nuclear weapons.

(TS) Clearly, the question of whether existing nuclear employment policy should be continued or modified, and if so, in what respects, is of greatest importance. In providing their comments to assist in preparing the report, the Joint Chiefs of Staff judged that the rationale used in developing current nuclear doctrine appears valid for the immediate future. They recommend that current nuclear policy as described in NSDM–242 be retained.

(TS) The analyses and discussions of PRM–10 suggest that there is still no consensus with respect to some elements of the general war targeting criteria described in NSDM–242. It is apparent that follow-on work will be required in this area, and I intend to continue such study. I am not, therefore, prepared to make a final recommendation on the ultimate disposition of NSDM–242 at this time. The attached report therefore does not present that issue for decision by you.

(S) Nevertheless, whatever judgments may ultimately be made on its details, NSDM–242 represented a major step in nuclear employment policy. It promulgated for the first time a single national policy for employment of both strategic and theater nuclear forces—i.e., for planning how our existing forces would be used if necessary. It is a major advance in providing an opportunity for greater participation by the (civilian) National Command Authorities in nuclear planning, and for rationalizing the planning process. Moreover, in addition to establishing objectives and policy for nuclear weapons employment planning,

NSDM–242 also specified several tasks to be undertaken in the areas of crisis management, declaratory policy, political–military interface in the planning process, and Presidential review of the resulting operational plans. For a variety of reasons, these requirements for implementing the overall policy have never all been completely satisfied. I believe that reemphasis on these areas will now be needed regardless of the eventual judgments made on NSDM–242.

(TS) With respect to the status of current guidance, I endorse the views of the Joint Chiefs of Staff that the policy stated in NSDM–242 appears valid for the immediate future, and I recommend that NSDM–242 be retained for employment planning purposes. I do this because even if (as is quite possible) further analysis indicates that significant policy modifications should be directed at some future point, adequate lead time will be necessary to transition to a new employment policy. Indeed, because of the complexity of the planning process, while some limited modifications might be introduced more rapidly, two or more years would be needed to develop new planning guidance and fully translate it into a new general war plan (SIOP). It would be essential that a comprehensive policy statement be in effect in the interim to provide focus and guidance [Page 160] for nuclear employment planning.

(S) I further recommend that action continue under the leadership of the Secretary of Defense to refine and support implementation of NSDM–242, especially in those areas unlikely to be affected by possible future policy adjustments. Such action should include:

- Continued action to familiarize you and your senior advisors with the content, capabilities, limitations and risks of the nuclear operational plans developed by the Joint Chiefs of Staff in support of the national nuclear employment policy, and to familiarize decision makers with the critical factors to be considered during the nuclear decision process.
- Initiation of actions needed to enhance the definition by you, with the advice of the National Security Council, of political objectives and criteria to assist the Joint Chiefs of Staff in their preparation of military plans for limited nuclear employment options when required by the President during a crisis. We also need to assure in peacetime that in crisis and war there will be adequate interaction and coordination of political, diplomatic, and military measures (including both operations and intelligence) in any attempt to control escalation through the limited employment of nuclear weapons.
- Initiation of a comprehensive review of deterrent concepts, to include alternative strategic targeting criteria which could serve as a basis for refinement of nuclear employment planning guidance (NUWEP) issued by the Secretary of Defense.

(S) The Joint Chiefs of Staff have developed and I have reviewed a briefing on non-SIOP (i.e., relatively small) nuclear options. This briefing on limited nuclear employment options and the status of their planning was prepared as a follow-on to briefings you have received on the SIOP. I recommend that after you have reviewed the attached report, we schedule the Joint Chiefs of Staff briefing for you.⁹

(S) I also recommend that you and I visit the Strategic Air Command and the Joint Strategic Target Planning Staff within the next two months—perhaps in late September or early in October.¹⁰

(S) I will make a further recommendation on the disposition of NSDM–242 and the appropriate policy on the issues it presents after I have completed a review of deterrent concepts and alternative strategic targeting criteria as a follow-on to PRM–10.

Harold Brown
[Page 161]

Tab B

Report Prepared in the Department of Defense¹¹

Washington, August 12, 1977

[Omitted here are the title page and table of contents.]

REPORT BY THE SECRETARY OF DEFENSE ON CURRENT US NUCLEAR EMPLOYMENT POLICY (U)

I. Introduction

(TS) The following report responds to the President's request for information and comments on the US nuclear employment policy established by NSDM–242.

(C) It is appropriate to note that NSDM–242 provides policy for planning the employment of all available US strategic and theater nuclear weapons (except anti-submarine and anti-air defense weapons), and should be regarded as quite distinct from acquisition and deployment policies which appear in other documents and about which determinations are made separately. The operational employment plans (SIOP and other contingency plans) developed in support of NSDM–242 are capabilities plans designed to achieve NSDM–242 objectives to the extent practicable with currently available nuclear forces.

(TS) The main body of the report (Sections II–V) focuses on our present nuclear war doctrine, and the underlying observations, assumptions and rationale that led to adoption of the policy represented by NSDM–242, and discusses the advisability of retaining NSDM–242. Discussions of the more specific questions relative to: (1) procedures for conducting nuclear war, (2) command and control survivability, and (3) objectives and assumptions of our current limited nuclear options are contained in appropriate annexes to the basic report.

(C) The report draws on the current views and recommendations of the Joint Chiefs of Staff. In its explanation of the current policy stated in NSDM–242, the report also draws heavily on the record of the NSSM–169 interagency study group on nuclear weapons employment policy¹² whose analyses and recommendations resulted in the specific policy stated in [Page 162] NSDM–242. The NSSM–169 group's rationale is presented to permit a better understanding of the current doctrine and why it was adopted. A critical analysis of this rationale has not been attempted. Such an analysis is appropriate as part of PRM–10 follow-on activities.

II. US Nuclear War Planning—Background (1962–74)

(S) Since 1962, employment planning for virtually all US strategic nuclear forces has been contained in the Single Integrated Operational Plan (SIOP). Until 1976, the SIOP was prepared in accordance with the National Strategic Targeting and Attack Policy (NSTAP), developed by the Joint Chiefs of Staff. The NSTAP was a JCS guidance document for military planners. There was, however, no single coherent statement or document that could be regarded as a national strategic nuclear employment policy. There was essentially no publicly stated US employment policy at all for theater nuclear forces (although US and its Allies in the Nuclear Planning Group had developed a classified body of nuclear employment guidelines for use in the NATO theater, and SACEUR had long had plans for employment of theater forces in conjunction with the SIOP). Actual theater nuclear force employment planning for the most part was limited to definition of procedures to be used by field commanders for requesting authority to selectively employ their tactical nuclear weapons prior to SIOP execution.

(TS) The fundamental planning concept of the NSTAP was to maximize US power in a nuclear exchange so as to maintain strategic superiority and thereby lead to early termination of the war on terms favorable to the US and its allies. Under the NSTAP, the basic SIOP objectives were:

- “To destroy or neutralize, on a selective basis, nuclear offensive capabilities of the enemy that threaten the United States and its allies, in order to limit damage to the United States and its allies to the extent practicable.”

“To destroy or neutralize, on a selective basis, a comprehensive enemy military target system in order to assist in the destruction of the enemy’s overall military capability.”

- “To destroy, on a selective basis and under all conditions of war initiation, the war-supporting and urban-industrial resources of the enemy.”

The NSTAP organized the SIOP into several attack options to provide a degree of flexibility to the National Command Authorities (NCA). Some additional flexibility was afforded by a built-in execution capability that permitted [2 lines not declassified]. Nevertheless, the SIOP execution options available under the NSTAP were massive by any standard with approximately [less than 1 line not declassified] being involved in even the smallest SIOP retaliatory option.

(TS) Although successive Secretaries of Defense and Presidents were familiar in general with NSTAP planning [Page 163] objectives and the SIOP, their statements about US policy for buying nuclear weapons frequently suggested nuclear employment doctrine and strategies that differed from the actual attacks planned in the SIOP. Strategic force sizing criteria of that era were predicated on the assumption that deterrence could be assured by threatening to destroy in retaliation about one-third of the Soviet population and 70 percent of the war-supporting economic base. Secretaries of Defense, though mentioning damage limitation as a US strategic forces objective, tended to imply that population and industry were the prime targets for “assured destruction” in retaliation to a Soviet nuclear attack against the United States. However, because forces to carry out the assured destruction policy were well hedged to cover a worst-case condition, weapons became available for targeting a comprehensive military target system. The actual employment plan (SIOP) continued to place the major weight of effort on enemy military forces to limit damage to the US and its allies, and to assist in the destruction of the enemy’s over-all military capability.

III. Nuclear Weapons Employment Policy Reassessment (1969–74)

(U) Overwhelming US nuclear superiority and the threat of large-scale nuclear retaliation provided a credible deterrent not only to deliberate nuclear attack throughout the 1950s and into the 1960s but also a reasonably plausible threat for response to conventional attacks. US nuclear capability continued to increase during this period with significant qualitative and quantitative improvements in US nuclear forces. Although concerns for the survivability of the US forces date back to discussion of the vulnerability of bomber bases in the late 1950s, the deployment of submarine-launched ballistic missiles, silo-based ICBMs on constant alert, as well as an alert posture for SAC bombers greatly enhanced the survivability of the US retaliatory capability. An effective US second-strike retaliatory capability appeared secure even after having sustained a major surprise attack by the Soviet Union, and some US capability existed to neutralize Soviet nuclear forces. Nevertheless, while by most measures, the US retained strategic nuclear superiority, the Soviets were rapidly narrowing this lead. In particular, the USSR was likewise achieving a secure strategic retaliatory capability themselves by rapid deployments of ICBMs protected in hardened silos, and SLBMs under the sea.

(S) In the minds of many analysts, these changing strategic realities raised serious questions as to the continued effectiveness of our nuclear deterrent. While virtually all believed our strategic forces and plans adequate to deter a major nuclear attack on the US, they were uncertain that the threat of large-scale nuclear retaliation provided the best deterrent to lesser attacks or threats to the US and its allies. Moreover, the changing strategic balance appeared to erode US allies’ confidence in [Page 164] the strength and credibility of the US nuclear deterrent. The diminished credibility of the assured destruction doctrine to deter attacks against Europe led Secretary McNamara to press for a flexible response strategy in NATO, eventually realized in MC 14/3¹³ in 1967.

(S) *Escalation Control*. Pursuant to the widely expressed doubts concerning the continued effectiveness of the US nuclear deterrent, Secretary Laird initiated a study in 1970. The study initially included participants from the Department of Defense under the chairmanship of Dr. John Foster. Later, in 1973, it became the NSSM–169 study, and representatives from the Department of State, the Central Intelligence Agency, and the staff of the National Security Council were added (though they

had been consulted informally earlier). The NSSM–169 study group concluded: (1) the threat of a massive retaliatory response is credible as a deterrent only at the upper levels of potential strategic nuclear conflict, and (2) if deterrence fails by accident or miscalculation, counterforce attacks against Soviet nuclear threats offer little confidence of holding damage to the US to a low level.

(U) The study group recommended that the US introduce limited nuclear employment options into its nuclear planning to enhance deterrence and to limit damage by controlling escalation. The National Command Authorities (NCA) would have greater flexibility in responding to a wider range of threats against the US and its allies and thereby increase the overall credibility of our deterrent and the possibility of limiting damage, if deterrence failed.

(U) The study group noted that under the previous nuclear employment policy (NSTAP), the means of limiting damage was viewed in military terms—counterforce attacks against nuclear threats. The group concluded that in a major nuclear conflict with the Soviet Union, counterforce strikes would not significantly reduce urban damage to the US and its allies. The US did not have the capabilities to effectively target the increasingly survivable Soviet nuclear forces, either preemptively or in retaliation. In addition, US strategic defense capabilities were limited. Air defense forces had been steadily declining and ballistic missile defense—not feasible for area defense in any event—was constrained by the ABM Treaty. Consequently, the group introduced the concept of limiting damage through the control of escalation. If deterrence failed, the objective would be to confine the conflict to the lowest level possible while attempting to coerce the enemy to terminate the war on terms acceptable to the US. Efforts to control escalation through the employment of limited nuclear options would show restraint. They would provide opportunities for the enemy to reconsider and to negotiate for an acceptable settlement [Page 165] (although not necessarily a settlement that achieves all of the objectives or goals desired by either side).

(U) Options to control escalation are intended to work on the will and determination of the opposing political leadership. They are not intended to fulfill a total set of military objectives but rather to:

- Reverse or stalemate the situation, at least temporarily.
- Diminish the enemy's expectation of success.
- Convince him that his limits will be exceeded.
- Present the enemy with a set of response alternatives which make it difficult for him to respond militarily in kind, and disadvantageous to escalate.
- Convince him that early termination is his most attractive alternative.

Key questions, perhaps unanswerable, are the degree to which such an approach can influence Soviet actions during a nuclear war, the means for conveying such messages (explicitly or implicitly), and the potential effectiveness of the whole approach. Even if the likely effectiveness is low, the stake is so high that in the absence of clearly better approaches, some pursuit of this one is justified.

(U) The concept of escalation control requires establishing boundaries limiting the scope, level, and duration of the violence. Planning emphasis is shifted from the traditional approach which places specific military targeting requirements (designed to secure military advantage) foremost to an approach in which political-military objectives established by the NCA (designed to terminate conflict as quickly as possible) are paramount. Special emphasis is placed on mutually supporting military (conventional and nuclear) and political measures. A high degree of interaction would be required among the NCA, the JCS, and the commanders of the unified and specified commands in selecting the details of the attack.

(U) Behind the concept of escalation control is the assumption that statesmen define some limits as to the losses (costs) they are willing to suffer to achieve their objectives. In theory, if the Soviets realize they cannot achieve their objectives quickly or easily, they will be deterred from further escalation. The options involved would be clearly below the level of a massive attack, and they would seek to coerce the enemy into negotiation for early war termination by striking relatively small numbers of

selected targets and providing a deterrent to further escalation by holding forth the prospect of subsequent massive attacks on targets he values highly. If, however, there are virtually no limits on the enemy's objectives or the costs he is willing to incur, then control of escalation through limited nuclear options may not be possible, and the conflict could only be stopped by destroying his capability to achieve his objective. If deterrence fails, the essential first step would be to assess the [Page 166] enemy's ultimate objectives and determine whether and where he would likely consider his costs disproportionate to any gain. Also required would be a clear understanding of our own objectives with respect to the issue at hand, and our willingness to risk a Soviet counter-limited strike in return.

(U) The NSSM 169 study group recognized that there can be no guarantee that the limited nuclear options will in fact control escalation. They believed, however, that the capability to employ limited nuclear options provides the NCA with the only means to try to control the level of violence.

General War

(S) A second focus of concern to the NSSM–169 study group was how best to deter a major attack on the US. Recognizing, however, that there was no way deterrence of a major nuclear war could be categorically assured, the group also developed targeting criteria that would contribute to the most favorable outcome possible for the US in the event deterrence failed. They concluded that the ability to deny the enemy his postwar objectives in terms of overall power and influence would be a better deterrent to a major nuclear attack than destroying what was defined in advance to be “unacceptable cost” in terms of fatalities and damage to the enemy's war-supporting and urban industrial base.

(S) Under NSTAP, the preponderance of weapons in the SIOP were aimed at military targets with attacks directed at enemy nuclear offensive capabilities, as well as attacks against a comprehensive military target system. A significantly smaller number of weapons were allocated against the war-supporting and urban-industrial targets to achieve the public strategy of “assured destruction.”

(S) In place of a general war-targeting objective threatening to kill millions of people and destroy a large percentage of Soviet industry, the NSSM–169 study group recommended threatening to destroy the enemy's military and economic power and slow down the enemy's postwar recovery. [3 lines not declassified] By directly threatening the political, military and economic institutions through which they direct and control their societies, they believed the opposing political leaders' goals and values would be more directly threatened and deterrence enhanced. Moreover, the US goal of securing the best position possible for the US in terms of postwar power and influence if deterrence fails would be promoted.

(TS) The group rejected the targeting alternative which emphasized indiscriminate destruction of population for the following reasons:

- The US was limited in its ability to insure approximately equal Soviet deaths to those suffered by the US given the demographic asymmetry (i.e., the US is more concentrated in cities than Soviet population) and the smaller [Page 167] yields of US warheads. (SIOP analyses in 1972 estimated 123 million US fatalities compared to 82 million Soviet fatalities in a maximum level nuclear exchange between the US and USSR, i.e., both sides fully generated with the USSR striking first.)
- The Soviets might be able to reduce the US ability to destroy Soviet population by massive civil defense programs. Although the extent and effectiveness of these programs were unknown, their existence created uncertainty in the estimates of Soviet civilian fatalities we would be able to achieve.
- The Soviet and PRC leadership might have a higher tolerance for casualties than perceived by the US, and might not be deterred by the threat to destroy the percentage of the population and industry defined by the US. Historically, the Soviets have accepted enormous human costs to secure the objectives of the communist regime. Millions of deaths are estimated to have occurred (though over years, not days) during the agricultural collectivization and Stalinist purges preceding World War II in which twenty million Soviets are estimated to have died.

— The US deterrent strategy, out of moral concern, should not emphasize the killing of non-combatants.

(TS) The NSSM-169 study group was not unanimous in believing that a threat to post-attack recovery targets would be more effective than some other targeting objective in terms of enhancing deterrence. Whether a criterion of comparable fatalities and damage was required was open to debate, and some held that the revised targeting criteria would not result in significant differences from the then currently declared threat of major retaliation against population. (This in fact, appeared to be the case when analysis of the first SIOP developed under NSDM-242 criteria showed—without considering possible Soviet civil defense—a decrease of only about two percent in expected Soviet fatalities. The political, economic, and military institutions are, in the large, where the population is). All of the NSSM-169 study group agreed, however, that the new criteria would not decrease deterrence of a major nuclear attack.

IV. Current Nuclear Employment Policy and Planning Guidance

(TS) The concepts developed by the NSSM-169 study group were incorporated in NSDM-242 issued by the President on January 24, 1974. NSDM-242 defined general employment planning objectives and broad targeting policy for US nuclear forces including for the first time, provisions for a strategic reserve force. It also established procedures for the development of further guidance and Presidential review of employment plans, as well as certain objectives and tasks for command, control and crisis management. The broad policies directed by NSDM-242 have been more definitively elaborated by the Secretary of Defense as Nuclear Weapons Employment Policy (NUWEP), and by the Joint Chiefs of Staff in their detailed [\[Page 168\]](#) planning guidance to the CINCs and the Joint Strategic Target Planning Staff.

(TS) Briefly stated, NSDM-242 and NUWEP establish that the fundamental objective of the current US doctrine of “Flexible Nuclear Response” is deterrence of conventional and nuclear attacks and attempts at coercion by nuclear powers against the US and its allies. This condition is established by an assured and evident US nuclear retaliatory capability effective across a wide spectrum of possible conflict situations. Should conflict occur, the strategy seeks to limit damage to the US and its allies through the control of escalation. This is to be accomplished by providing a wide range of employment options to the NCA for response to varying levels of provocation. These options are to be employed, in conjunction with other supporting diplomatic and military measures, to limit conflict to the lowest level feasible and coerce an enemy into negotiating a termination of the war on terms acceptable to the US and its allies. This is to be done while holding vital enemy targets hostage and threatening their subsequent destruction if the enemy fails to negotiate. The availability of such options is meant to enhance deterrence in the first place. To the extent that escalation cannot be controlled and an all-out war occurs, the strategy seeks to maximize US power relative to an enemy by destroying the political, economic and military structures supporting the enemy’s status as a major power and those resources critical to his early post-war recovery, limiting damage to the US to the degree practical, and by maintaining a strategic force in reserve for protection and coercion during and after a major nuclear exchange.

(U) Present policy concepts emphasize preplanning to: enhance force efficiency and effectiveness, provide for rapid execution, and provide a solid basis for estimating consequences (expected damage levels, fatalities, risks, etc.). The full range of politico-military conditions cannot be anticipated. Past experience has shown that national decisionmakers desire a full range of options to consider in determining appropriate solutions to a crisis. It is therefore prudent and necessary to maintain the capability for responding to a wide range of hostile actions. Therefore, nuclear employment plans have been designed to allow for flexible adaptation as events unfold prior to execution. Where only general plans can be formulated in advance, dedicated organizations and specialized planning procedures have been established within the military structure of the Joint Staff and unified and specified commands for the rapid development, assessment and execution of specific limited nuclear employment options. It is assumed that there will be a high degree of control and direction by the NCA which will require close interaction between political, diplomatic, and military actions in the face of rapidly, often obscurely unfolding events. An acceptable concept has not yet evolved of how this interaction between the NCA and other involved organizations might occur. [\[Page 169\]](#)

(U) The announcement by Secretary Schlesinger of the new US employment policy was widely interpreted as indicating that the US was shifting its nuclear targeting to a silo-busting, counterforce strategy which would require acquisition of new strategic weapon systems and capabilities. In fact, the changes in the targeting, and the additional flexibility incorporated in the employment plans have not as so far carried out entailed purchase of new systems. Schlesinger did acknowledge, however, that the doctrine would be improved if certain qualitative improvements were funded for the forces and command and control systems. The contemporaneous discussion of better US hard target capability related to a distinct issue—avoiding the perceptions that he believed would result if the USSR were thought to have a great edge over the US in any particular category of strategic capability. Neither did the doctrine represent a radical shift in targeting emphasis. On the contrary, prepared US nuclear war plans had always included options for attacking both urban-industrial and military (hard and soft) targets, but heretofore they always involved the expenditure of several thousand nuclear weapons. The concepts of NSDM-242 were meant to provide greater flexibility to the NCA by providing a wide spectrum of variously sized options from which to choose an appropriate response at any level of aggression.

(TS) In implementing NSDM-242, the Secretary of Defense's NUWEP guidance directed that Major Attack Options and Selected Attack Options (MAOs and SAOs) be included in the SIOP. MAOs provide for massive attacks against the primary military resources (nuclear and conventional), the recovery resources, and the national leadership of the USSR and PRC and their allies. SAOs provide for generally large-scale (although smaller than MAOs) attacks against selected military targets, and are target sub-sets extracted from the MAOs. SAOs contribute to the objective of escalation control by providing preplanned options within the SIOP to respond to large-scale Soviet or PRC nuclear attacks against military targets of the US and/or its allies.

(S) Limited and Regional Nuclear Options (LNOs and RNOs) were also required by NSDM-242 and NUWEP. LNOs and RNOs provide smaller, more discrete alternatives to the larger retaliatory attacks planned in the SIOP as MAOs and SAOs. LNOs are generally small-scale preplanned attacks by nuclear-capable strategic or theater forces against fixed targets. RNOs are attacks, normally by nuclear-capable theater forces, designed to counter deployed attacking enemy forces and supporting resources. These non-SIOP options, which normally vary in size [2 lines not declassified], are developed by the unified and specified commanders (CINCs) and reviewed and approved by the Joint Chiefs of Staff. They are then incorporated [Page 170] in the contingency operations plans prepared by the CINCs to support defense tasks and objectives in their assigned geographic region or functional area of responsibility.

(U) For the most part, LNO-RNO development has produced options that emphasize their military utility (rather than political utility) in the defense of an area or interest believed vital to the US. While criteria for assessing military effectiveness are well developed and widely understood, and thus can be used to guide preplanning of options, definition of useful criteria for evaluating the potential political utility of LNOs and RNOs has been found to be very complex. Factors relevant to a determination of political utility are extremely subjective, and may not be adequately understood until an actual crisis begins to unfold. Thus, it has been easier to conceptualize and pre-plan limited options on the basis of their potential military utility rather than potential political contribution in the contingency situations that have been postulated. Progress is needed toward the development and statement of political objectives and criteria to enhance the military planners' capability to pre-plan, and more importantly, to translate national political objectives into limited options useful to the NCA in a nuclear crisis. In this regard, the Joint Chiefs of Staff in collaboration with the Office of the Secretary of Defense, have initiated a series of politico-military war simulations designed to raise the level of familiarization and understanding of nuclear war considerations among senior civilian and military officials. Two separate series of simulations have examined limited nuclear option concepts in crisis scenarios focused on the Mid-East and northeast Asia. The simulations have been considered very informative and useful by most participants, and should be continued. Better insight, however, still remains to be developed in the area of interfacing political objectives, requirements and criteria with military plans and capabilities. This will be particularly important in the management of an actual crisis when it will be necessary to integrate political and diplomatic measures with military activities if an attempt is being made to control escalation through the limited employment of nuclear weapons.

V. Advisability of Retaining NSDM–242

(S) The NSDM–242 nuclear weapons employment policy provided, for the first time, a nationally promulgated common policy framework for both strategic and theater forces. It remains for this Administration to determine whether or not NSDM–242 should be retained, modified or replaced.

(S) It would be inadvisable merely to cancel NSDM–242 in the absence of an equally comprehensive national nuclear weapons employment policy statement. Nuclear weapons employment planning is an immensely complex and time consuming activity. Significant modifications to nuclear weapons employment doctrine generate literally vast adjustments not only in [Page 171] the targeting plans themselves, but in command and control procedures, emergency action procedures, training, intelligence requirements, as well as many other areas. Two years of intense activity elapsed between the signing of NSDM–242 and the effective date of the first SIOP developed accordingly. Consequently, transition to any new or significantly revised doctrine would require an adequate lead time.

(TS) Even though no one can say with confidence that the existence of limited nuclear options will either deter a potential aggressor in every case, or that escalation can be controlled through the employment of limited nuclear options, there is no doubt that we would wish to consider alternative options in a serious crisis. Agreement exists that the US should continue to plan for the flexible use of its nuclear weapons.

(TS) With respect to general war, we can never be absolutely certain of precisely what or how much will deter the Soviet leadership. Consequently, we cannot be confident that a massive nuclear war will not occur by either design or miscalculation. The concept of focusing our general war targeting objectives on the enemy power structure itself, and on its regenerative capacity, enables the doctrine to be related not only to deterrence, but also to US interests and objectives in a postwar world, should a general war occur. It is believed that the NSDM–242 targeting objectives currently incorporated in the SIOP are adequate for the immediate future. We intend, however, to examine alternative targeting concepts in PRM–10 follow-on analyses. It is possible that these analyses may result in recommendations for future modifications to strategic targeting objectives and priorities.

(TS) The Joint Chiefs of Staff were asked to provide their views with respect to NSDM–242. After review of the doctrine, they concluded that the rationale used in developing current nuclear employment policy over the past several years appears to be valid for the immediate future. They believe the doctrine expressed in NSDM–242 is responsive to the realities of current technology and the relative military power balance between the United States and the Soviet Union. In that its adoption has placed greater emphasis on planning for limited options, they believe it improves the capability for deterrence across the entire spectrum of conflict and provides the NCA with a realistic flexible response capability. For these reasons, the Joint Chiefs of Staff believe current doctrine for the employment of nuclear weapons, as embodied in NSDM–242 should be retained. They believe the following additional factors would support this position:

- Deterrence remains the principal objective of national policy. Intelligence analyses of current capabilities of the Soviet Union and the projected threats indicate that the Soviet Union is rapidly closing the technology gap which will [Page 172] allow it to enhance its capability to wage nuclear conflict at various levels of intensity. Therefore, it is prudent to maintain US deterrent capability over a wide spectrum of possible conflict through a concept that embraces both strategic and theater nuclear weapons. This close coupling of US strategic capabilities to theater forces and the extension of the nuclear umbrella to theaters without stalwart US conventional defenses are believed to have enhanced deterrence of nuclear and conventional coercion and attack, especially in the face of Soviet force improvement.
- Targeting for an assured retaliation capability should remain focused on the postwar recovery resources and, as practical, national leadership and primary military threats. This is particularly true in light of evident Soviet hardening efforts (storage facilities, work force shelters, political/military centers, etc.) and other civil defense programs. Targeting of national leadership (includes political/military C3) and military nuclear/conventional capabilities enhances deterrence, helps limit damage to the extent practical, and denies the Soviets the capability to seize industrial resources in Europe as a

basis for their recovery. Additional intelligence support is needed to provide an adequate data base which will enable recovery forecasting and improve the capability for targeting post-attack recovery resources.

- A survivable strategic reserve force is considered even more necessary as a means for the United States to deter further attack (following a major nuclear exchange) from either the USSR/PRC or other world powers, or to achieve objectives which were not fully accomplished by the initial SIOF laydown.
- Escalation control appears to be an increasingly viable concept in view of the extensive Soviet ICBM hardening efforts, the SLBM threat, and ABM Treaty agreements. Counterforce (as a damage limiting capability) has limited effectiveness, making escalation control one of the few means of limiting damage to the United States, particularly in the absence of improved US civil defense measures.
- US NATO Allies' confidence in deterrence is strengthened if they believe the United States has options that are usable and effective to defend NATO. NATO's Nuclear Operations (NOP) provide for general nuclear war attacks on the Warsaw Pact which can be simultaneously executed with the US SIOF. Included in the NOP are Selected Employment Plans (SEPs) developed by NATO which are similar in concept to US LNOs and RNOs. Any US limited nuclear capability strengthens Allied confidence in the US willingness and capability to defend NATO. Consideration of current policy must include its impact on Allied solidarity.

RECOMMENDATIONS

(TS) I endorse the views of the Joint Chiefs of Staff that the policy stated in NSDM–242 appears valid for the immediate future, and I recommend that NSDM–242 be retained for employment planning purposes. I do this because even if further analysis indicates that significant policy modifications should be directed at some future point, adequate lead time will be necessary to transition to a new employment policy. Indeed, because of the complexity of the planning process, while some limited modifications might be introduced more rapidly, two or more years would be needed to develop new planning guidance and fully translate it into a new general war plan (SIOF). It would be essential that a comprehensive policy statement be in effect in the interim to provide focus and guidance for nuclear employment planning. [Page 173]

(S) I further recommend that action continue under the leadership of the Secretary of Defense to refine and support implementation of NSDM–242, especially in those areas unlikely to be affected by possible future policy adjustments. Such action should include:

- Continued action to familiarize you and your senior advisors with the content, capabilities, limitations and risks of the nuclear operational plans developed by the Joint Chiefs of Staff in support of the national nuclear employment policy, and to familiarize decision makers with the critical factors to be considered during the nuclear decision process.¹⁴
- Initiation of actions needed to enhance the definition by you, with the advice of the National Security Council, of political objectives and criteria to assist the Joint Chiefs of Staff in their preparation of military plans for limited nuclear employment options when required by the President during a crisis. We also need to assure in peacetime that in crisis and war there will be adequate interaction and coordination of political, diplomatic, and military measures (including both operations and intelligence) in any attempt to control escalation through the limited employment of nuclear weapons.¹⁵
- Initiation of a comprehensive review of deterrent concepts to include alternative strategic targeting criteria which could serve as a basis for refinement of nuclear employment planning guidance (NUWEP) issued by the Secretary of Defense.

Tab C

Paper Prepared in the Department of Defense¹⁶

Washington, undated

PROCEDURES FOR CONDUCTING NUCLEAR WAR

(TS) *Limited Nuclear Conflict*. The primary command center for conduct of a limited nuclear conflict would be the National Military Command Center (NMCC). The Secretary of Defense and Joint Chiefs of Staff, operating from the NMCC, would monitor the conflict through inputs from the commanders of unified and specified commands (CINCs) and the National Military Intelligence Center (NMIC) and make military recommendations to the President. Nuclear weapon employment [5 lines not declassified] Joint Chiefs of Staff would be provided to the President for his consideration and decision. Request for employment of nuclear weapons would also come from the theater CINC to the Joint Chiefs of Staff in the form of a request for selective or conditional nuclear release authority. The Joint Chiefs of Staff would pass the request with their advice and recommendations to the NCA for decision. In the case of NATO Europe, SACEUR would submit his request through US channels concurrent with introducing it into the rest of NATO. While theater communications would be somewhat degraded it is expected that connectivity would be sufficient to permit the NMCC to receive reconnaissance data, strike reports, nuclear detonation reports, and maintain continuous interaction with appropriate theater CINCs. Based on this information and guidance from the NCA and their advisers (i.e., the NSC, and other government agency principals) the Joint Chiefs of Staff in coordination with the CINCs would develop appropriate options for NCA consideration. Such options might include additional force deployments, follow-on nuclear strikes, a review of the SIOP Execution Considerations, and a tentative execution decision as a precautionary measure should the conflict escalate to a higher level. [10 lines not declassified] [Page 174.]

(TS) *General War*. Should the crisis lead to a major nuclear exchange, SIOP execution considerations and Joint Chiefs of Staff recommendations on appropriate SIOP options would be passed to the NCA for decision. The decision would then be implemented by Joint Chiefs of Staff transmission of emergency actions messages to the SIOP forces. First priority following the exchange would be location of the surviving NCA and Chairman, Joint Chiefs of Staff, or their successors. [9 lines not declassified]

Tab D

Paper Prepared in the Department of Defense¹⁷

Washington, undated

SURVIVABILITY OF US COMMAND AND CONTROL SYSTEMS

(TS) Under either attack with warning or surprise conditions, analytical studies show that US C3 systems could suffer severe damage from a major nuclear exchange or a limited exchange aimed at command and control components.¹⁸ Most fixed, primary and alternate command centers could be destroyed [7 lines not declassified]. [Page 175.]

(TS) Since the Blue Ribbon Panel Report,¹⁹ several survivability improvements have been made in US command and control systems. [5 lines not declassified]. In summary, the potential for survivability of the US command and control system today is better than it was in 1970, with recent assessments concluding that it contributes significantly to a credible deterrence.

Tab E

Paper Prepared in the Department of Defense²⁰

Washington, undated

LIMITED NUCLEAR EMPLOYMENT OPTIONS (LNO/RNO) OBJECTIVES AND ASSUMPTIONS

(U) The basic objective of non-SIOP limited nuclear employment options (LNOs and RNOs) is to strengthen deterrence across a broader range of possible conflicts by providing a series of preplanned, measured and discrete nuclear response options more applicable to situations where the deterrent threat of the large-scale options in the SIOP would be inappropriate or incredible. In the event that deterrence fails, the principal objective of non-SIOP options is to secure early war termination on terms acceptable to the US and its allies at the lowest level of conflict feasible, thereby limiting the level of overall damage. In accordance with this objective, LNOs and RNOs have been developed for a number of contingencies. These options are available for consideration by the NCA during a crisis and for use in conjunction with political and other military measures such as employment of conventional forces. Specific objectives of current LNOs and RNOs are contained in the Appendix.

(U) The basic political assumption underlying the development of non-SIOP nuclear options is that escalation control can be achieved. The fundamental assumption of escalation control is that there are limits on the risks or losses the enemy is willing to accept. Militarily, a key assumption is that the controlled, restrained use of nuclear force provides the capability to demonstrate resolve, to reverse locally a disadvantageous force balance, or to destroy specific, valued targets. [Page 176] When political and military efforts are combined, the assumption is that escalation can be controlled by enhancing or guiding enemy perceptions. This is done by communicating with him (communicating NATO's intentions, MOLINK, etc.) and by limiting the level, scope and duration of nuclear strikes, while achieving military effectiveness.

Appendix to Tab E²¹

Washington, undated

LIMITED NUCLEAR OPTIONS (LNOs) AND REGIONAL NUCLEAR OPTIONS (RNOs) OBJECTIVES (U)

EUROPEAN COMMAND

[3 paragraphs (18 lines) not declassified]

ATLANTIC COMMAND

[2 paragraphs (9 lines) not declassified]

PACIFIC COMMAND

[1 paragraph (8 lines) not declassified]

STRATEGIC AIR COMMAND

[1 paragraph (8 lines) not declassified]

Tab F

Memorandum From the Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff (Brown) to Secretary of Defense Brown²²

Washington, May 9, 1977

SUBJECT

Nuclear Weapons Employment Doctrine (U)

1. (TS) The Joint Chiefs of Staff are pleased to provide their views on the subjects raised in the memorandum by the Assistant to the President for National Security Affairs, 31 March 1977.²³ A more detailed discussion of each issue is contained in [\[Page 177\]](#) the Appendix.²⁴ The questions in the aforementioned memorandum are repeated below for clarity.

a. "A succinct statement of our present nuclear war doctrine. In so doing, you should comment on the advisability of retaining or cancelling NSDM 242 and limited nuclear options."

The fundamental objective of current US doctrine for the employment of nuclear weapons is deterrence of conventional or nuclear attacks and attempts at coercion by nuclear powers against the United States and its allies. If deterrence fails, the objective seeks to limit damage to the United States and its allies through control of escalation by employing first conventional and then, if necessary, limited nuclear options designed to limit the conflict and reestablish deterrence. If escalation cannot be controlled, the objective seeks to maximize US power relative to an enemy in the postwar era. This doctrine is responsive to the realities of current technology and the relative military power balance between the United States and the Soviet Union. Its adoption has placed greater emphasis on planning for limited options, thereby improving the capability for deterrence across the entire spectrum of conflict and providing the NCA with a realistic, flexible response capability. It also complements and supports NATO's strategy of flexible response. For these reasons, NSDM 242 and limited nuclear options should be retained.

b. "A brief statement of the procedures for actually conducting a nuclear war, limited or total, beyond the initial phase. This should include an indication of the command procedures for the conduct of such a war, including such operational aspects as the location and procedures for effective exercise of control. In addition, please provide your assessment of the survivability of our command and control systems. The Blue Ribbon Defense Panel of 1970 reached some disturbing conclusions regarding this matter."

The key element in US nuclear war procedures is the direct involvement of the NCA in not only the initial stages but the execution of a nuclear war. The effectiveness of this participation is almost totally dependent on the survivability of command centers and reliable communications. The primary command center for conduct of a limited nuclear conflict would be the [\[5 lines not declassified\]](#). In a major nuclear attack on the United States, the SIOP could be successfully executed. [\[2 lines not declassified\]](#). Under the conditions of limited nuclear exchange, the effectiveness of communications with executing forces would be dependent on the intensity of the nuclear exchange and whether or not attacks were aimed at command and control components. Continuing efforts are being made to enhance the survivability and effectiveness of these systems.

c. "A short statement of the basic objectives to be achieved through our various LNO options and some indication of the assumptions, both political and military, regarding the specific LNOs."

Limited nuclear options have been developed to support generalized military campaigns within a theater of operations, complementing rather than substituting for conventional forces. Real and declared capability to employ limited [\[Page 178\]](#) nuclear options has enhanced deterrence, especially in the face of Soviet force improvement. These options support the principal means to limit damage; i.e., through control of escalation. Their existence provides implicit recognition that the

purpose of military power is not only to deter but also to prosecute military conflict. Political and military assumptions regarding specific LNOs are contained in the Annex. A non-SIOP nuclear options briefing, which you heard on 11 April 1977, is available for presentation to the Assistant to the President for National Security Affairs.

2. (TS) The current doctrine for the employment of nuclear weapons, as embodied in NSDM 242, should be retained. Actions should continue to refine its implementation and support its execution, including the development of a capability for comparative postwar recovery analysis; improvement of CINC ad hoc planning capabilities; additional intelligence support; and an enhancement of command and control survivability, reliability, and flexibility. To enhance implementation of nuclear weapons employment doctrine, the Joint Chiefs of Staff have instituted an annual review process, the initial results of which were forwarded to you by JCSM–81–77, 15 March 1977, “Nuclear Weapons Employment Guidance (U).”²⁵

For the Joint Chiefs of Staff:

George S. Brown
Chairman
Joint Chiefs of Staff

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1. Source: Carter Library, National Security Affairs, Brzezinski Material, Subject File, Box 47, Nuclear War Doctrine: Limited Nuclear Options (LNO) and Regional Nuclear Options (RNO): 3/77–1/80. Top Secret; Sensitive. Sent for information. Drafted by Odom, who sent the memorandum to Brzezinski under a September 9 covering memorandum. (Ibid.) An unknown hand wrote on the first page of Odom’s memorandum: “Hand Carried to the President 9/16/77.” Carter wrote in the upper right corner of Brzezinski’s memorandum: “Zbig—See margin notes.”[ⓔ]
 2. Not found attached; see [Document 31](#).[ⓔ]
 3. Not found attached; see *Foreign Relations*, 1969–1976, vol. XXXV, National Security Policy, 1973–1976, Document 31.[ⓔ]
 4. Orr Kelly, “If U.S. Comes Under Nuclear Assault,” *U.S. News & World Report*, September 5, 1977.[ⓔ]
 5. Brzezinski wrote below this paragraph: “I inserted 5 clips, marking items you might want to read, time-permitting.”[ⓔ]
 6. Top Secret.[ⓔ]
 7. See [footnote 4](#), [Document 9](#).[ⓔ]
 8. The June 3 memorandum is in Carter Library, National Security Council, Institutional Files, Box 62, PRC 022, 7/8/77, US/USSR—PRM 10.[ⓔ]
 9. In the right margin next to this paragraph, Carter wrote: “do so soon.”[ⓔ]
 10. In the right margin next to this paragraph, Carter wrote: “ok.”[ⓔ]
 11. Top Secret.[ⓔ]
 12. For the Summary Report of the Inter-Agency Working Group on NSSM 169, June 8, 1973, see *Foreign Relations*, 1969–1976, vol. XXXV, National Security Policy, 1973–1976, Document 17.[ⓔ]
 13. See [footnote 4](#), [Document 29](#).[ⓔ]
 14. In the right margin next to this paragraph, Carter wrote: “ok JC.”[ⓔ]
 15. In the right margin next to this paragraph, Carter wrote: “ok—Zbig do this.”[ⓔ]
 16. Top Secret.[ⓔ]
 17. Top Secret.[ⓔ]
 18. Carter underlined “aimed at command and control components” and wrote next to it: “certain target.”[ⓔ]

19. See footnote 3, Document 9.

20. Top Secret.

21. Top Secret.

22. Top Secret.

23. See Document 9.

24. Not found attached.

25. Not found.