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

Washington, August 26, 1980

SUBJECT

The Carter Transformation of Our Strategic Doctrine

I want to summarize for you the fundamental change occurring in U.S. strategic doctrine over the last three years. You may or may not want to take public credit for it, but you should have a clear view in your own mind of its historic significance. That is being obscured and confused in the public fuss over PD–59,² the last of a series of related directives you have signed. (C)

The Requirement for Change

There have been two previous transformations in our strategic doctrine. The first, “massive retaliation,” occurred in the 1950s under President Eisenhower.³ It was designed to deter the Soviets by our large lead in nuclear weapons and strategic bombers. The second, “assured destruction,” was sponsored in the 1960s by Presidents Kennedy and Johnson as they watched Soviet forces grow and the U.S. lead shrink.⁴ Secretary McNamara designed the concept primarily as a budgetary instrument to decide “how much was enough?” in strategic forces. The doctrinal notion was added by others. They, however, believed the Soviets would stop their buildup at near our force levels. When they did not and when they introduced new qualitative capabilities, the doctrine lost much of its relevance. To revise our doctrine then became a critical although unpopular task in face of the continuing Soviet buildup through the 1970s. You have accomplished this through a number of directives which put much more emphasis on objective capabilities to reinforce the subjective and psychological aspects of deterrence. (C)

What Has Been Done

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Based upon reviews and recommendations from the agencies, in response to conceptualization and coordination by the NSC, you have directed (a) that we maintain “essential equivalence” in general purpose and strategic force levels (PD–18); that strategic defense is part of the overall military balance (PD–41); that national objectives be met for telecommunications to support all levels of conflict (PD–53); that mobilization planning guidance be developed for all agencies, DOD being only one of them (PD–57); that a conceptually new approach be applied to “continuity of government” and maintenance of the National Command Authority under nuclear attack (PD–58); that a significant step be taken in the evolutionary process of our targeting policy (PD–59).⁵ An elaboration of each of these is important to give you a more textured appreciation of the overall policy changes. (C)

PD–18, signed in August 1977, put stress on reversing the conventional force balance adverse trends in Europe, acquiring a U.S. rapid deployment force, and maintaining strategic force “essential equivalence” in face of the continuing Soviet buildup.⁶ It directed a number of follow-on efforts, because, as PRM–10 showed, the implications of “parity” with the USSR were complex

and needed several additional U.S. responses. (C)

PD–41, on civil defense policy, signed in September 1978, revived the view that defensive capabilities are part of the strategic balance, even if only a small part.⁷ The idea of “defense” was abandoned in the 1960s after serious attention to it by both President Eisenhower and, for a time, President Kennedy. Studies by CIA corroborated the Soviet open literature about Soviet civil defense capabilities, and a dispersed Soviet population, even partially dispersed, might make a difference of tens of millions of initial survivors. Changes in our targeting could not reduce the difference significantly. (C)

PD–53, national security telecommunications policy, was signed in November 1979.⁸ It set forth, for the first time, national C3I objectives which Defense, as the executive agent of the National Communications System (set up by Kennedy [Page 887] after the Cuban Missile Crisis in 1962 when he found agencies with separate and non-interoperable communications systems, a paralyzing condition for his control), has the responsibility to implement, not only in its C3I programs but also with guidance to common carriers on interoperability and survivability for crisis and war. PD–53 changed fundamentally the objective of telecommunications heretofore: sufficient to communicate an execution message for a retaliatory strike but nothing more for endurance, flexibility, and a prolonged conflict.⁹ (U)

PD–57, mobilization planning guidance, signed in March 1980, tasked the first work on mobilization guidance at the national level since the 1950s.¹⁰ Treated as less than a serious issue, even in the Defense Department until lately, mobilization responsibilities in other agencies, although critical for wartime, had long been a joke. As the Soviet buildup cancelled our superiority, the joke became a dangerous one, undercutting our credibility in the eyes of careful foreign observers. Little concrete result has been achieved to date, but the level of serious interest is surprisingly high after PD–57’s emergence. A parallel achievement in manpower mobilization has been the draft registration law. It is a major step. (C)

PD–58, Continuity of Government/C3I, signed this June, initiates a wholly new conceptual approach to making the National Command Authority and the Presidency for civil government survivable under conditions of repeated nuclear attack.¹¹ The existing system built in the 1950s, was judged vulnerable already by 1962 in a report to President Kennedy. President Nixon received a similar report in 1970 but failed to act on it. Neither report offered a solution to the problem of hardsite vulnerability. Until the new system is built and tested, it is doubtful that the U.S. could ride out a well-conceived Soviet attack on our national C3I, carry through to a third or fourth ranking successor if need be, and retaliate in a coordinated manner. Even if we were lucky enough to do that, the staff support for the Presidency to mobilize, control the forces, and govern the civil sector is lacking. PD–58 requires the development of precisely that support. (S)

PD–59, the nuclear weapons employment policy directive, completes the series.¹² It is, to some extent, an addition [Page 888] to NSDM–242,¹³ the first effort at “limited” nuclear options taken in 1974 by Nixon and Schlesinger. I want to spell out for you in some detail the differences between the two directives, however, because there are claims already being made that PD–59 is nothing new, just a rehash of NSDM–242. (C)

a. [8 lines not declassified]

b. NSDM–242 put most emphasis on targeting postwar recovery resources, i.e. cities and industry. PD–59 retains this insofar as it retains the SIOP. For all other targeting, and even within the SIOP after economic recovery targets are hit, PD–59 puts the targeting emphasis on these categories: all military, C3I, and war-supporting industry. (C)

c. NSDM–242 treated C3I as needed to transmit “emergency action messages” to our forces, to chat with Moscow via MOLINK, and for diplomacy with other states. PD–59 calls for C3I of a much more flexible and extensive kind: (1) control of both nuclear and general purpose forces operations and (2) a “look-shoot-look” capability to locate new and moving targets rapidly through a prolonged conflict. (C)

d. [6 lines not declassified]

e. NSDM–242 said nothing about “acquisition policy,” only “employment policy.” Programmatically, therefore, NSDM–242 remained a dead letter. PD–59 ties acquisition to employment policy. That means that OMB, Defense, and the DCI must take the new policy into account in their budgets and programs. (C)

NSDM–242 kept the old theoretical baggage, trying to make a limited “retaliatory” or even a first use strike more credible as the SIOP became less credible. Could the U.S. public sit calmly through such LNOs, having not even civil defense protection? NSDM–242 was a misconceived document. It merely exaggerated the flaws of the SIOP. PD–59 is fundamentally different, while not designed to be a “war fighting” doctrine, it takes into account Soviet employment doctrine because, with the Soviet acquisition of such large and accurate forces, that doctrine cannot be ignored if deterrence is to be maintained. To fail to make this change would be to risk drifting into a situation where our doctrine and capabilities could, in a crisis, deter ourselves more than the Soviets. (C)

In summary, you have taken a series of steps that add up to a major revision of our strategic doctrine, the third one [Page 889] since World War II. The previous two, like this one, have been driven by Soviet force development. This is the first phase of the task. The second, the programmatic phase, will be a major task of your second-term defense policy.¹⁴ (C)

1. Source: Carter Library, Brzezinski Donated Material, Subject File, Box 35, PD 59: (5/80–1/81). Secret; Outside the System. Sent for information. Carter wrote in the upper right corner of the memorandum: “Zbig—Good. Share w/VP, Ed, Harold. J.” In an August 22 memorandum to Brzezinski, Odom discussed “The Differences Between PD–59 and NSDM–242.” In a marginal notation on Odom’s memorandum, Brzezinski instructed him to use it as a base for an expanded memorandum that Brzezinski would send to Carter. (Ibid.)↵
2. See [Document 210](#).↵
3. Carter underlined “massive retaliation” and “1950s” in this sentence.↵
4. Carter underlined “assured destruction” and “1960s” in this sentence.↵
5. Carter underlined “essential equivalence,” “telecommunications,” “mobilization planning guidance,” “maintenance of the National Command Authority under nuclear attack,” and “targeting policy” in this sentence. The Presidential Directives are printed as [Documents 31, 91, 165, 176, 201, and 208](#).↵
6. Carter underlined “PD–18,” “reversing the conventional force balance adverse trends in Europe,” “U.S. rapid deployment force,” and “maintaining strategic force ‘essential equivalence’” in this sentence.↵
7. Carter underlined “PD–41” and “civil defense policy” in this sentence.↵
8. Carter underlined “PD–53” and “telecommunications” in this sentence.↵
9. Carter underlined “retaliatory strike,” “endurance,” “flexibility,” and “prolonged conflict” in this sentence.↵
10. Carter underlined “PD–57” and “mobilization planning” in this sentence.↵
11. Carter underlined “PD–58,” “Continuity of Government/C3I,” “Command Authority,” and “survivable” in this sentence.↵
12. Carter underlined “PD–59” and “nuclear weapons employment policy” in this sentence.↵
13. See [footnote 2, Document 29](#).↵
14. Brzezinski sent the memorandum to Mondale and Muskie under cover of a September 2 memorandum. It reads in part: “The President asked me to share the enclosed memorandum with you, especially since there is likely to be some public discussion of our current strategic doctrine. In the last three and one-half years, the President has taken a series of steps that add up to a major revision of our strategic doctrine, the third such major revision since World War II. The Administration should obtain more public credit for this than it has so far.” (Carter Library, National Security Affairs, Brzezinski Material, Subject File, Box 68, Vice President 1–10/80)↵

