

Editorial

Nuclear Dangers Crowd Upon Us

John Bolton is Under-Secretary of State for Arms Control and International Security in the United States. What prevents this job from becoming a sinecure is not the frenetic pace of new arms control agreements, which the administration hardly favours. Mr Bolton keeps busy, alright, but his activity involves the shredding of old accords rather than the progress of the new.

On February 21st 2002, Mr Bolton told us that the latest casualty of nuclear weapons policy was to be the 1978 pledge of Cyrus Vance ‘not to use nuclear weapons against any non-nuclear-weapon state party to the Non-Proliferation Treaty’, unless such a state joined with nuclear forces in mounting an attack on the Americans. This commitment of the Carter administration was aimed at easing the difficult situation which was arising among signatories to the Non-Proliferation Treaty, who looked in vain for signs that the nuclear powers might back away from ever more entrenched nuclear policies.

Today, Mr Bolton sees no need to encourage compliance with the non-proliferation regime, since proliferators are by definition rogues, verging on evil, and may quite easily be zapped.

Therefore, ‘we are not ruling anything in, and we are not ruling anything out’ says the Under-Secretary. ‘We are just not into theoretical assertions’, he continues.

But there is a theory which inevitably attaches itself to the new nuclear doctrine. As one American critic, by no means from the soft pacifist left, puts it: ‘The United States is now willing to use nuclear weapons against any foe for any reason’.

Abrasive though this may seem, it is not the only twist to have been given to nuclear weapons policy by the Bush administration: after all, once the President had unilaterally withdrawn from the Anti-Ballistic Missile Treaty, it was generally assumed that many surplus warheads were to be destroyed. Not so. All are, instead, to be stored.

Unilateralism is the other face of full spectrum dominance. Henceforth, the nuclear threat is not to be muted by such ‘soft’ nightmares as Mutually Assured Destruction. Now, raw terror is to be the chosen option.

When we documented the Russian changes in nuclear policy, two years ago, we argued that things would likely get worse until ‘there is a peace movement strong enough, and confident enough, to recall the objections to nuclear war and the absurdities of a return to nuclear deterrence as the mainspring of international relations’. Things have, indeed, got worse, and the dangers crowd upon us.

Ken Coates



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