

American, NATO and British nuclear strategy were all formulated around a perceived threat from the Soviet Union. For all the talk about useable weapons and new threats, Russia is still the dominant concern for US nuclear planners. If you “follow the money” it is clear that billions of dollars are being spent on sustaining a force similar to what the US has today, but with fewer operational weapons. The main emphasis is on keeping a large arsenal of high yield nuclear weapons, that can be used at long range until beyond 2040. NATO is left confused – the alliance no longer has any standing nuclear plans – but it still has this large arsenal of American bombs, plus the British Trident force.

Since the end of the Cold War key figures in the US nuclear establishment have claimed that there is a new role for nuclear weapons – counter proliferation – dealing with the threat of the spread of not only nuclear, but also chemical and biological weapons. US policy says that they are willing to strike first in a pre-emptive attack on any country developing Weapons of Mass Destruction. But the credibility of these threats is suspect. The reality is that in the 1991 Gulf War, faced with an enemy armed with chemical weapons, the US explored nuclear options – but completely ruled them out.

Britain and other NATO allies have given limited support for the new approach – not ruling out the role of nuclear weapons for counter-proliferation –