

Under Eisenhower, strategic airpower became the centerpiece of US military strategy.

The “New Look”

DURING the early 1950s, the Eisenhower Administration ushered in what came to be called the “New Look” in US strategic affairs. It was a major transition, one that pushed strategic airpower—and thus the United States Air Force—to the forefront of the nation’s Cold War defense policies.

Gen. Dwight D. Eisenhower, World War II’s Supreme Commander, Allied Expeditionary Force, had won the 1952 Presidential election and took office in early 1953, just as the trauma of the Korean War was headed toward an armistice. The hard-fought war marked a major turning point in US security affairs. Its aftermath would see a rise in the importance of a large nuclear deterrent force.

The Korean War had sparked a huge US buildup, and there would be no going back to the status quo ante. Unlike in other postwar periods, the US did not dismantle its military strength.

The US had repeatedly slashed its post-World War II force. On the eve of the Korean War, which erupted June 25, 1950, its size had bottomed out at fewer than 1.5 million airmen, soldiers, sailors, and Marines. The Communist attack jolted the US into a new buildup. Within a year, America had 3.3 million troops under arms, and the wartime force peaked in 1953 at more than 3.6 million. Between the end of the Korean War in 1953 and the start of the Vietnam War buildup in 1965, US end strength never fell below 2.5 million and averaged 2.8 million in any given year.

Under Eisenhower, however, there was to be a major re-examination of



Early in his presidency, Dwight Eisenhower speaks with Boeing officials and members of his Cabinet after inspecting the YB-52 prototype of the B-52 bomber. To his left are George Humphrey, secretary of the treasury, and Harold Talbott, Secretary of the Air Force. Eisenhower’s “New Look” defense policy bolstered the airpower cause and placed more emphasis on Strategic Air Command.

the parts, balance, and composition of this force. The emphasis would be on countering Soviet power and general war. Korea had generated a strong distaste for regional conflict.

Investing in Airpower

The result of the Eisenhower review was the emergence of a deeper dependence on nuclear weapons and long-range airpower to deter war. Eisenhower chose not to maintain all of the very large Army and Navy that had fought the Korean War. He chose, rather, to invest more heavily in airpower, especially Strategic Air Command, in large part because that kind of defense could be built for lower cost. The planned USAF buildup to 143 wings had been imperiled by the Truman Administration’s final fiscal plan, which provided USAF less money than expected.

By Herman S. Wolk

Gen. Hoyt S. Vandenberg, Air Force Chief of Staff, argued that the proposed funding would support only 79 wings.

“Once again the growth of American airpower is threatened with start-and-stop planning and at a time when we face an enemy who has more modern jet fighters than we have and enough long-range bombers to attack this country in a sudden all-out effort. Rather than reduce our efforts to attain air superiority, we should now increase those efforts,” said Vandenberg.

In 1953, the experience of the Korean War was uppermost in the minds of Eisenhower Administration officials. Coming on the heels of World War II, this first conflict of the nuclear era was enormously unpopular with the American public.

American policy-makers had little doubt that the Soviet Union was behind the war and that it might well consider making a move in western Europe. The idea that the Soviet Union could tie down US forces in out-of-the-way locales fueled immense frustration in Washington. Moreover, the fact that the Russians now possessed nuclear weapons gave impetus to the US military buildup that Truman had launched in mid-1950.

The New Look evolved throughout 1953 and was geared to stave off an open-ended commitment of US forces worldwide, one that could drain the nation’s resources. The idea was that the US would be the one to decide how and where any future wars would be fought. Here was a strategy that, in the words of Secretary of State John Foster Dulles, would allow the nation to retaliate against Communist aggression “by means and at places of our own choosing.”

The emphasis was to be on nuclear deterrence. The way to keep the peace was to persuade a potential enemy not to start a war. This shift in emphasis from land and sea power to airpower also owed a great deal to the Administration’s fiscal conservatism, meaning the desire to maintain a balanced federal budget and lower tax rates.

In the early 1950s, the Joint Chiefs of Staff developed the view that hostility between the West and the Soviet Union would continue indefinitely and that, consequently, a



The B-47 Stratojet could carry either conventional or nuclear bombs. It was a major element in the New Look policy, which called for a national airpower force superior to that of any other nation in the world.

reliance on airpower was appropriate.

In June 1952, the Air Force Council, representing the top echelon of the Air Staff, took a position officially supporting long-range airpower as the major deterrent to Soviet military power. In the summer of 1952, Secretary of the Air Force Thomas K. Finletter, Gen. Nathan F. Twining, vice chief of staff (in lieu of Vandenberg, who was recuperating from cancer surgery), Roswell L. Gilpatric, undersecretary of the Air Force, and Lt. Gen. Laurence S. Kuter, deputy chief of staff for personnel, convened at Finletter’s home in Bar Harbor, Maine, where they discussed future Air Force strategy.

“The New Phase”

These officials drafted a paper titled, “The New Phase,” which referred to preparations to initiate the 143-wing program. For the New Phase, the conferees proposed the establishment of a standing nuclear deterrent force. Subsequently, the Air Staff recommended that the JCS make a request to NATO’s Standing Group to designate the strategic air offensive as a crucial function of NATO strategy.

After the November 1952 election, Eisenhower left for a trip to Korea. He took along Charles E. Wilson, who was to become the next Secretary of Defense, and linked up on Iwo Jima with Adm. Arthur W. Radford, who was to become JCS

Chairman. After a tour of the war theater, the group headed home aboard USS *Helena*. Secretary of State-designate John Foster Dulles and George M. Humphrey, soon to become secretary of the treasury, came aboard at Guam.

At this meeting, Eisenhower emphasized that the United States needed to maintain a strong defense posture that would see to the security of the nation “for the long haul” while also staying within the bounds of fiscal prudence. Radford said US forces were overextended, especially in Asia; he called for the creation of a “mobile strategic reserve” of US conventional forces whose prime purpose would be to back up local, indigenous allies in regional wars. Dulles, for his part, was in favor of building up massive strategic nuclear retaliatory power capable of striking at the sources of Communist power.

This rudimentary New Look military policy evolved considerably in the summer of 1953. The Administration undertook Project Solarium, crafted by the top echelon of the Eisenhower team during a series of secretive meetings (held in the White House solarium). In June, military and civilian officials conferred at the National War College and the incoming JCS team also met to discuss policy options. It was no secret that the Administration was committed, as Eisenhower emphasized, “to make a completely new, fresh

survey of our military capability, in the light of our global commitments.”

In July, Eisenhower directed Wilson to get the Chiefs working on a comprehensive defense review. This reassessment, the President emphasized, should include strategic concepts and implementing plans, roles and missions, composition of forces, readiness of forces, development of new weapons, the resulting advances in tactics, and foreign military assistance programs.

Eisenhower declared, “I have in mind elimination of overlapping in operations and administration and the urgent need for a really austere basis in military preparations and operations.” The President wanted to provide guidance to the National Security Council so as “to ensure the defense of our country for the long haul.”

Contentious Days

The bureaucratic foundation of the New Look was soon laid down in NSC 162/2, a document approved by Eisenhower on Oct. 30, 1953. However, high-level meetings leading to the final approval of that document had been marked by contentiousness.

The man chosen by Eisenhower as the new Chief of Naval Operations, Adm. Robert B. Carney, opposed the plan. So did the new Army Chief of Staff, Gen. Matthew B. Ridgway. These service leaders and others perceived the new document to be a har-

binger of decreasing missions and force structures for their own services.

Eisenhower insisted that the new emphasis on strategic retaliatory power did not mean a diminution of the importance of other missions and forces, particularly those of the Army and Navy. Moreover, the President noted, the new program could not be put into place quickly. It would take time.

On one thing, however, the President was firm, and he said it in this way: “No deterrent to war could compare in importance with this [strategic nuclear] retaliatory striking power.”

Dulles agreed that it would take many years to fully implement the significant changes in policy and force structure that would be required by the New Look, but he added, “If we do not decide now on this change, no change will ever occur.”

NSC 162/2, taking into account the scope and magnitude of the Soviet military threat, stated, “The United States must meet the necessary costs of the policies essential for its security.” Since the outbreak of war in Korea, a coalition of allies, with US help, had deterred additional Communist aggression. The North Atlantic Treaty Organization now maintained sufficient strength to make a Soviet move against western Europe costly. However, the strategic retaliatory power of the United States remained the major deterrent.

“The risk of Soviet aggression,” said NSC 162/2, “will be minimized

by maintaining a strong security posture, with emphasis on adequate offensive retaliatory strength and defensive strength. This must be based on massive atomic capability including necessary bases; an integrated and effective continental defensive system; ready forces of the United States and its allies suitably deployed and adequate to deter or initially counter aggression and to discharge required initial tasks in the event of a general war; and an adequate mobilization base; all supported by the determined spirit of the US people.”

This stated objective posture marked a significant change from the post-World War II containment doctrine which emphasized countermoves against Soviet power at the place of aggression. Deterrence and retaliation were at the heart of the New Look strategy, and it would hinge upon strategic nuclear weapons and continental defense. Naval power also would have a prominent place. Ground forces were to play a less-prominent role. In the wake of the Korean War, the New Look postulated that, in limited wars overseas, the United States would depend on allies to provide most ground forces, in addition to bases for American airpower and expeditionary forces.

Eisenhower’s Threat

Despite the unease in some quarters, the Joint Chiefs on Dec. 9, 1953, formally declared that “policies stated in NSC 162/2 will adequately provide for the security of the US.” At about the same time, Eisenhower asserted that it was his firm intention to dispatch SAC nuclear retaliatory forces “immediately upon trustworthy evidence of a general attack against the West.”

Meanwhile, SAC was building up to a force unmatched in striking power. By the close of 1953, SAC had fully equipped 11 of the 17 wings in the atomic strike force. The bomber force included 329 B-47s and 185 B-36s. These aircraft were supported by 137 RB-136s, 500 tankers, and more than 200 fighters. Strategic Air Command personnel numbered almost 160,000 at 29 Stateside and 10 overseas bases.

In December 1953, Radford, the new Chairman of the Joint Chiefs, stated that the new defense policy was crafted for the “long pull, not a year of crisis.” The United States,



Gen. Nathan Twining is sworn in as Chief of Staff by Secretary of the Air Force Talbott in 1953. Looking on are (left to right) Col. K.E. Thiebaud, air adjutant general, and USAF’s just-retired Chief, Gen. Hoyt Vandenberg. Twining in 1952 argued for creation of a standing nuclear deterrent force.

Radford said, “must be ready for tremendous, vast, retaliatory, and counteroffensive blows in the event of a global war, and we must be ready for lesser military actions short of an all-out war.”

By late 1953, Radford had become convinced that the top priority should be accorded to airpower. The nation should give its strongest effort, he said, to “the creation, the maintenance, and the exploitation of modern airpower—offensively, defensively, and in support of other forces.” Airpower, he said, “is a primary requirement.”

On Jan. 12, 1954, Dulles gave public definition to the Administration’s New Look. His “Massive Retaliation” speech, delivered to the Council on Foreign Relations in New York, warned that the Soviet Union planned “gradually to divide and weaken the free nations by overextending them.” It was important not to exhaust the armed forces in numerous military actions.

Dulles argued that the unclear US security policies in previous years meant US military leaders “could not be selective” in building American forces.

“If an enemy could pick his time and place and method of warfare,” said the secretary of state, “and if our policy was to remain the traditional one of meeting aggression by direct and local opposition, then we needed to be ready to fight in the Arctic and in the tropics; in Asia, the Near East and in Europe; by sea, by land, and by air; with old weapons and with new weapons.”

Security—At Reasonable Prices

No local defense, Dulles maintained, could, by itself, contain Communist land forces. Consequently, the Administration would “depend primarily upon a great capacity to retaliate instantly, by means and at places of our choosing. ... Instead of having to try to be ready to meet the enemy’s many choices, ... it is now possible to get, and share, more basic security at less cost.”

Dulles believed that Korea offered an example for the future. There, he said, a cease-fire had been negoti-



Charles Wilson, Secretary of Defense and Adm. Arthur Radford, Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff (shown here in 1955), were instrumental in crafting the New Look strategy. Radford, especially, was an airpower advocate.

ated “on honorable terms.” It was possible to do this, he went on, because the enemy in early 1953 “faced the possibility that the fighting might, to his own great peril, soon spread beyond the limits and methods which he had selected.” The Communists had been warned that now a response to aggression “would not necessarily be confined to Korea.”

Dulles figured that in the long run, strategic nuclear deterrence offered the best way for the United States to deal with the threat of Communist aggression. His formulation was this: “Local defenses must be reinforced by the further deterrent of massive retaliatory power.” And President Eisenhower emphasized: “We shall not be aggressors, but we and our allies have and will maintain a massive capability to strike back.” This pronouncement was aimed directly at the Soviet Union and China.

As a concept, “massive retaliation” was not entirely new. The buildup in strategic airpower since 1950 and the evolution of the “Air Concept” had been obscured by the fighting in Korea and the periodic calls for “balanced forces.” Moreover, Dulles’s communication to China via New Delhi—intimating a potential use of nuclear weapons by

the US—certainly foreshadowed the massive retaliation speech.

The Korean War finale, with its implied American threat to employ atomic weapons—propelled the United States into an era of strategic nuclear deterrence. The Dulles doctrine of massive retaliation solidified the Air Force as the lead service in the New Look defense policy.

President Eisenhower himself sketched the contours of the New Look doctrine, and he said the mission of the military was to “get ready and stay ready.” It was, he added, a kind of “floating D-Day” strategy.

JCS Chairman Radford, who since the 1949 B-36 hearings and the Revolt of the Admirals had turned himself into an airpower apostle, in late 1953 stated: “This nation will maintain a national airpower superior to that of any other nation in the world.”

Twining, who had succeeded Vandenberg as Air Force Chief of Staff, described the New Look as a strategy of “preparedness for general war, should one occur, and maintenance of the capability to cope with lesser situations.”

And Gen. Thomas D. White, Air Force vice chief of staff, noting that airpower took advantage of the nation’s technical skill, emphasized that with its ability to deliver nuclear weapons, the Air Force “had been recognized as an instrument of national policy.”

Korea may have militarized the Cold War, but the New Look launched the US fully into it. ■

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