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The Unacceptable Risks of Trump's Nuclear Strategy

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Last week, the Huffington Post published on its website a draft version of the Trump administration's updated Nuclear Posture Review, which is to replace Barack Obama's previous nuclear strategy document that was adopted in 2010. Despite the fact that the draft is marked "pre-decisional" and can still be amended, knowledgeable American sources claim that this is the document that will officially be presented in February after the president's traditional speech before Congress.

The American Arms Control Association and the British newspaper the Guardian have already described this paper as "hawkish," in that it calls for "major changes" in the management of the country's nuclear arsenal and authorizes the deployment of long-range nuclear cruise missiles, as well as the use of low-yield nuclear warheads.

It would be hard not to agree with these assessments.

The published document tries to make the case that the US is now confronted with an international security situation that is "more complex and demanding," thus apparently requiring immediate updates to the nation's nuclear forces. It eloquently describes how the United States cut back on its strategic and tactical nuclear weapons, only to watch as its "strategic competitors" did not follow its lead. But at the same time, provision has been made to update the Americans' nuclear command, control, and communications (NC3) system (hereinafter the corresponding numbered lines from the draft document are noted: 246-254). The Pentagon is instructed to continue to deploy strategic and tactical nuclear arsenals in its "forward-operating bases."

Although claiming that the US does not wish to regard either Russia or China as an adversary, everything in the report glibly suggests otherwise. Despite the acknowledgment that Russia has significantly reduced its strategic nuclear arsenals, the unsupported allegation is made that Moscow is preparing to update its strategic nuclear forces and retains a large number of tactical nuclear weapons. It remains unclear how such an odd conclusion has been reached about the latter type of weapon, since those numbers have never been released by either side, only the fact that the quantity of such arms has been decreased (to an unnamed level), as part of the process of implementing the "presidential initiatives" of 1991-1992. Russia and the United States have never sat down at the negotiating table to try to limit or reduce tactical nuclear weapons.

Moscow is also accused, without evidence, of having made nuclear threats against US allies. There is no proof that Russia has ever done such a thing, and the allegation is all the more galling given the fact that after the US military dropped atomic bombs on Japan, there

were seven different times when the Pentagon drew up plans to use nuclear weapons in several regional confrontations and conflicts!

The NPR makes similar complaints about China, claiming that Beijing is modernizing and expanding its nuclear arsenal.

It also mentions the "nuclear ambitions" of North Korea and Iran.

To that end, the new Nuclear Policy Review proclaims the need for a flexible and tailored nuclear strategy (line 94) that will make it possible to adapt the US approach to "deterring one or more potential adversaries in different circumstances."

Although the reader is assured that the president of the United States may only resort to nuclear weapons in the most extreme circumstances, it is also noted they may be used to protect either the US or its allies and partners from even from the limited use of nuclear weapons by an adversary (104), or from an enemy attack using conventional weapons (141), based on the strategy of extended nuclear deterrence that is provided to US allies in Europe, Asia, and the Asia-Pacific region (213-214 and 855). The document implies that Washington will continue to abide by the nuclear sharing agreements it has already signed with America's NATO allies (256-258). This means that American nuclear weapons will remain stationed within the borders of those allied states, including in Europe. NATO's nuclear-sharing policy – in which three countries own nuclear weapons and another five agree to host US nuclear warheads (1219-1221) – will remain unchanged.

There is no doubt that this new policy document, like its predecessor from 2010, will indirectly reiterate the provision that permits a nuclear first strike against any potential enemy of the United States, its allies, or partners. In order to improve its ability to deliver nuclear strikes, special emphasis is placed on the strengthening of space-based reconnaissance and communications resources.

The US will preserve its traditional strategic nuclear triad and nuclear delivery vehicles, including dual-capable aircraft. The plans to create an essentially new strategic nuclear triad have been confirmed. Eliminating any of its three legs has been ruled out (306-308).

The document insists that nuclear weapons must remain in the country for as long as required (121-122). This likely explains why the US has staunchly refused to ratify the Comprehensive Nuclear-Test-Ban Treaty (529).

This new nuclear strategy reaffirms Washington's earlier statements about the feasibility of using low-yield nuclear warheads – initially mounted on ballistic missiles, and later on the cruise missiles of nuclear submarines, making it impossible to know in advance whether a nuclear or conventional weapon is on board. Obvious this would greatly upset the global strategic balance. Nor can strategic stability be attained through the ambitious plan to replace old nuclear warheads with their new versions (451-489). The document announces that in 2020 the new B61-12 nuclear gravity bomb will be introduced, the accuracy of which is known to suffer from a high ratio of circular error probability (325-326).

The Russian stance in regard to the negotiations over the fate of the New START Treaty and tactical nuclear weapons has been distorted.

Without any proof whatsoever the Russians have been accused of breaching the 1987 INF Treaty, even though the United States has already violated it 92 times since 2001 by using intermediate- and shorter-range missiles as targets to test the effectiveness of its ABM system. And Washington will violate it once again when it introduces a new American mobile, ground-based, nuclear-tipped cruise missile – which was banned by the 1987 treaty signed by Gorbachev and Reagan – and subsequently deploys that missile on the European continent.

Without offering any evidence, Moscow is also accused of noncompliance with the Treaty on Open Skies, which the Americans did not hesitate to violate first, by introducing unjustifiable restrictions on the zones approved for Russian surveillance flights over the US. Although no NATO member state has ever ratified the CFE Treaty, Russia was cited as being in breach, although Moscow did ratify this important treaty and later proposed the adoption of the European Security Treaty, which was rejected out of hand by every member of this military alliance of "transatlantic solidarity."

In short, the Trump administration's updated Nuclear Posture Review is an extremely negative, aggressive, and explosive document. Its approval will dramatically complicate the global strategic scenario, undermine international stability, and result in the suspension of a number of arms-control agreements.

This document, which launches a Cold War 2.0, might also trigger two whole new types of arms races (in addition to the existing nuclear-missile confrontation and proliferation of nuclear weapons): i.e., races to stockpile anti-missile and space weapons.

The new US nuclear strategy will further damage its relations with the Russian Federation and the People's Republic of China – relationships that Washington has already thrown under the bus.

If the current US administration does eventually approve this document that entails such perilous consequences for the destiny of our world, then it will be taking risks that are unbefitting the enormous sense of responsibility that the great nuclear powers should feel, share, and retain in order to further peace on our planet and security in the interests of all countries.

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