

Trump's Nuclear Doctrine Is a Threat to Strategic Stability

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Global Research, February 09, 2018

[Oriental Review](#) 8 February 2018

Region: [USA](#)

Theme: [Military and WMD](#), [US NATO](#)

[War Agenda](#)

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On Feb. 2, 2018, the US finally [released](#) its Nuclear Posture Review (NPR), the leaked draft of which we already [analyzed](#) last month.

As expected, compared with the [previous](#) “Obama” version, the new doctrine greatly elevates the role and significance of nuclear weapons in US military policy. It’s a highly charged document – more aggressive and offensive – and will radically undermine the world’s strategic stability as a whole, while further complicating relations with Russia and China. The usual accusations have been leveled against Pyongyang, decrying the expansion of its arsenal of nuclear missiles, and also against Tehran, as “Iran’s nuclear ambitions remain an unresolved concern.”

Among other issues, the new document also claims that the Russians have adopted a policy known as “limited nuclear escalation,” i.e., the use of a nuclear first strike in a local conflict or the threat to do so, although no such provision has ever existed in the nuclear doctrines of either the former Soviet Union or the Russian Federation, then or now.

Vague justifications for use

The revised nuclear doctrine focuses on the simultaneous resolution of two key issues: it has its sights set on radical, long-term updates to US strategic and tactical nuclear powers, while simultaneously lowering the bar for the use of nuclear weapons, specifically allowing for the possibility of detonating low-yield nuclear warheads as part of limited nuclear strikes. For example, the B61-12 nuclear bomb, with its warheads of 50, 10, 1.5 or 0.3 kilotons, is viewed as an auspicious new development. In addition, over the next two years there are plans to install lower-yield nuclear warheads on the SLBM Trident II (D5), and later on a new nuclear-armed sea-launched cruise missile – although the minimum yields of their warheads have yet to be revealed.



Little Boy nuclear bomb dropped by the US Air Forces on the Japanese city of Hiroshima in 1945 exploded with an energy of approximately 15 kilotons of TNT



The Japanese City of Hiroshima in the aftermath of the nuclear bombing by the US in 1945

The statements by US military officials alleging that the use of low-yield nuclear warheads

would supposedly be more “humane” does not negate the fact that lowered “thresholds” for the use of nuclear force might lead to an escalation of nuclear war even situations that began as small armed conflicts.

This approved strategy includes the admission that the United States is ready to consider the possibility of using nuclear weapons “in the most extreme circumstances to protect our vital interests.”

The quintessence of the NPR lies in the premise that nuclear weapons could potentially be used to inflict a first strike against almost any country in the world, including states that might be using only their conventional armed forces against the US, while engaged in any sort of conflict, even a small one with minimal consequences. The list of justifications for the use of nuclear weapons also includes attacks using conventional weapons against US or allied nuclear forces, their command and control, or warning and attack assessment capabilities. This was also acknowledged by Deputy Secretary of Defense Patrick Shanahan at a press briefing dedicated to the release of the new nuclear posture review.

The preface to the Nuclear Policy Review signed by the head of the Pentagon, James Mattis, is worded in such a way as to make it clear that the US president must have the option to use nuclear weapons in the event of a “sudden changes in the geopolitical environment” or even “technological surprise.”

The vagueness of certain provisions, obviously implying the permissibility of a free hand when it comes to launching nuclear missiles, is testament to the US administration’s irresponsible attitude toward their use.

All these premises are evidence of the widening array of circumstances and justifications that could spur the US president to order a nuclear first strike. In this context, it is worth remembering that last year the US Congress, for the first time in more than forty years, openly discussed the fact that the country’s president has the full prerogative to issue a unilateral and unappealable order to use nuclear weapons against any state in the world, without requiring authorization from the highest US legislative body and without a declaration of war against that state. Donald Trump, who is still threatening to use nuclear force against North Korea, ignored this Congressional hearing and reiterated that if the head of state were to issue such an order, the country’s nuclear missiles would respond within 3-5 minutes.

Trump’s nuclear strategy reaffirms the policy of “extended nuclear deterrence,” which keeps the American “nuclear umbrella” unfurled over 32 nations: 28 US NATO allies, plus Japan, South Korea, Australia, and Israel. The Pentagon will also maintain its bilateral “nuclear sharing agreements” with a large group of its non-nuclear allies in the transatlantic alliance, as part of which they conduct training exercises that simulate the launch of nuclear weapons and nuclear bombing drills using aircraft belonging to non-nuclear states. Those states also have input in the planning for the use of American nuclear weapons.

Thus, the nuclear doctrine released on Feb. 2 retains, on the whole, the policy of “unconditional offensive nuclear deterrence,” as previously proclaimed by past US presidents, but also lays the groundwork for not only radical updates to the country’s entire arsenal of nuclear missiles, but also legal safeguards for an agenda to create an entirely new strategic nuclear triad, which in the very near future will begin to replace the existing

strategic nuclear triad, both in terms of new types of carriers that will be put into service for offensive strategic nuclear weapons and tactical nuclear weapons with new tactical and technical features, as well as in the form of new types of nuclear weapons that switch between high- and low-yield warheads.

At the same time, the entire command, control, and communications system for American nuclear missiles is going to be modernized.

As US military and political documents have often acknowledged, in order to strengthen its nuclear-missile component, over the coming decade the Pentagon will receive as much as \$400 billion, and \$1.2 trillion in the next 30 years. The executive summary of the new nuclear doctrine concedes that in the coming years, expenditures on the program to replace and renew the country's nuclear arsenal will equal 6.4 percent of the US defense budget, exceeding the current figure by three to four percentage points.

The prospects for a new nuclear triad

The nuclear strategy adopted in February specifies that the material and technical basis of the recreated strategic nuclear triad will consist of 400 single-warhead, ground-based ICBMs, presumably to be named the Minuteman IV, the first of which will materialize in 2029. An increased number of launch facilities (450) will be built to field them, which will improve the survivability of this element of the strategic nuclear triad by dispersing this component of America's strategic nuclear forces across several US states and creating up to 50 empty decoy launchers for such missiles.



This triad will also initially include up to 240 Trident II (D5) SLBMs installed on 12 COLUMBIA-class SSBNs with a larger displacement than the OHIO-class SSBNs: 21,000 tons vs. 19,000 tons, respectively. Later these SSBNs will be replaced by new versions. The first of this new class of nuclear submarines should be out on combat patrols by 2031.

The third element of the updated triad will consist of 60 heavy B-21 Raider bombers with air-launched nuclear cruise missiles and a flexible nuclear payload. The construction of the first such bomber should be complete in 2025. Later, these bombers will be equipped with a new long-range cruise missile with a nuclear warhead.

In addition, the new strategic nuclear triad will be bolstered by an unnamed number of medium-range dual capable bombers (able to drop bombs with either nuclear or conventional warheads). The basis for the latter will be the new multi-role, F-35 fighter-bombers, which will be forward-deployed and capable of carrying out both ground attacks and well as air defense. Those are already flying with the US Marines, which means that soon they're going to show up on the airfields of many NATO and non-NATO US allies that sit adjacent to the borders of Russia and China.

To spite some American experts who advocated a transition to a strategic nuclear dyad, the commitment to maintaining all three elements of the current and future triad has been reiterated, which, in accordance with the final documents of the 2012 NATO summit, have in turn been combined into the "Chicago triad," (a single force that incorporates both missile defense and conventional weapons), an area in which the United States has always and will always call all the shots.

Arms Control

In principle, Trump's updated nuclear doctrine recognizes the prudence of furthering the goals of non-proliferation and ensuring control over nuclear missiles. All that sounds quite promising.

But it's certainly no secret that the United States is violating the Treaty on the Non-Proliferation of Nuclear Weapons by deploying nuclear weapons and the aircraft to deliver them inside the borders of five NATO member states. The US Senate plans to refuse to ratify the Comprehensive Nuclear Test Ban Treaty (ratified by Russia back in 2000), and the US National Nuclear Security Administration has been directed to prepare for underground tests of explosive nuclear devices.

It's also worth remembering that the US has violated the Treaty on Open Skies, derailed the ratification of the Treaty on Conventional Armed Forces in Europe, refused to discuss the draft European Security Treaty, unilaterally dissolved the Anti-Ballistic Missile Treaty, and pulled the plug on talks regarding anti-satellite weapons. Washington has blocked the adoption of an international Treaty for a WMD-Free Zone in the Middle East. The Americans have blocked a total of more than 20 various international initiatives to prevent the deployment of weapons in outer space, including the draft of a relevant Russian-Chinese treaty.

The updated nuclear doctrine mentions the possibility of extending the New START Treaty, which will expire in 2021, for another five years, that is, until 2026. And yet the US seems incapable of remembering that there is an organic relationship between strategic offensive and strategic defensive nuclear weapons, an example of the latter being the antimissile weapons that they have been stockpiling wildly and stationing around the globe, in addition to their forward-deployed arsenal, in the form of tactical nuclear and conventional weapons, which is positioned in the immediate vicinity of Russia's borders. Washington has sidestepped the implementation of the Presidential Nuclear Initiatives of 1991-1992, which were a series of political pledges to reduce tactical nuclear weapons and to withdraw the ones that had been deployed.

In accordance with the new nuclear doctrine, the US will not promise to refrain from a nuclear first strike or to reduce its level of combat readiness, but will preserve an agreement with Russia that neither side will train the sights of its strategic nuclear missiles on each other's territory.

The Feb. 2 Nuclear Policy Review unfairly and without evidence claims that Russia has allegedly developed a new intermediate-range ground-launched cruise missile, code-named the SSC-8, claiming it was banned by the 1987 INF Treaty. But no such missile exists in Russia. In addition, this nuclear document never specifies where and when such a missile was tested or deployed. The US had previously alleged that Moscow had "tested" three different ballistic missiles that supposedly fell under the definitions of the terminology in the 1987 treaty, but they later withdrew their "accusations," because all of those had a completely different firing range that was not limited by the treaty. In short, Washington clearly hasn't been playing a pro game.

It is quite obvious that these cryptic, empty statements coming from the Pentagon and the State Department are designed to provide a smokescreen of words to disguise two simple facts about the implementation of the 1987 treaty.

First of all, the Americans are tossing out such allegations in order to camouflage their own readiness to create a new mobile, ground-based, nuclear-tipped, intermediate-range cruise missile, which, if added to their arsenal, would be a direct violation of the very INF Treaty that Washington is so loudly anxious to protect.

Second, such statements keep getting repeated in order to distract attention from the Americans' real and numerous violations of this treaty. The true problem lies in the fact that the Americans' failed attempt on Jan. 31 of this year to intercept an intermediate-range ballistic missile using the new SM-3 Block IIA Interceptor near Hawaii was actually their 93rd violation of this treaty since 2001 – they have been using those banned intermediate- and shorter-range missiles as targets when testing the effectiveness of the interceptors of their ABM system. The Pentagon isn't going to stop doing this.

It's also clear that the Russians aren't going to stop insisting that the current administration fully comply with all provisions of the INF Treaty, and if the US is thinking about withdrawing from it, then Russia will immediately respond in kind, as President Vladimir Putin has already stated.

With the adoption of its new NPR, the Trump administration has obviously worsened the imbalance of the delicate mechanisms of control that exist in order to regulate a whole array of weapons that are clear threats to the world's strategic stability.

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ISBN Number: 978-0-9737147-5-3

Year: 2012

Pages: 102

List Price: \$15.95



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