The Trump Administration’s Nuclear Weapons Policy: First Steps

Michaela Dodge

Nuclear weapons continue to be essential for U.S. national security and will continue to play an irreplaceable role in deterring a large-scale attack against the U.S. homeland. Nuclear weapons in the hands of U.S. adversaries and potential adversaries are the only weapons that pose an existential threat to the nation. The Trump Administration will have a unique opportunity to reverse President Barack Obama’s ill-founded nuclear weapons policies, strengthen deterrence, assure allies, and ensure that U.S. nuclear modernization programs continue, including maintaining a triad of U.S. delivery systems: bombers, intercontinental-range ballistic missiles, and submarines.

Wishful Thinking and Nuclear Security

The Trump Administration will have the opportunity—and responsibility—to honestly assess the state of U.S. nuclear weapons infrastructure and the state of the international environment that guides U.S. nuclear weapons planning. The Obama Administration aspired to work toward conditions that would allow the United States to eliminate its nuclear weapons by reducing their role in U.S. national security strategy. But its assessments were guided more by wishful thinking than realities of the international security environment.

In its 2010 Nuclear Posture Review, the White House assessed that Russia is no longer an adversary and that the potential for conflict is low—a fallacy demonstrated by Russia’s annexation of Ukraine and other steps hostile to U.S. interests. Since President Obama took office, Russia has not only launched the most expensive nuclear weapons modernization program since the end of the Cold War, it is also in violation of a whole host of bilateral and international arms control treaties, some of which, like the Conventional Forces in Europe Treaty or the Intermediate Range Nuclear Forces (INF) Treaty, have profound implications for U.S. allies in Europe. Moscow repeatedly threatened to use nuclear weapons “pre-emptively” against U.S. allies in Europe. But the Kremlin is not the only adversary the United States has to worry about, particularly since U.S. nuclear weapons provide the ultimate guarantee of many U.S. allies’ security, including Japan and South Korea.

North Korea has conducted four nuclear weapons tests since 2009, two this year. Iran, flush with cash and emboldened due to the relaxation of nuclear restrictions under the Administration’s flawed Iran deal, has not only been violating the deal but also continues to fund terrorist activities in the Middle East. The nuclear deal puts Iran in a better position to develop nuclear weapons than otherwise would have been the case. Other nations now place an increased value on nuclear weapons as guarantors of their security.

Next Steps

To strengthen deterrence, assure allies, and ensure the safety and reliability of U.S. nuclear weapons, the Trump Administration should:
- Re-examine assumptions that guide U.S. nuclear weapons policy on both unclassified and classified levels. The Trump Administration should conduct a classified and unclassified review of U.S. nuclear weapon policies, particularly focusing on the threat level, allied assurances, and nuclear weapons modernization.

- Request funding for U.S. nuclear warheads, delivery platforms including the triad, and the supporting nuclear infrastructure. U.S. nuclear weapon systems are aged, and a majority of them are serving well past their intended service lives. The United States has neglected nuclear weapons modernization programs since the end of the Cold War and as components are expiring, the country must get ahead of the curve and modernize its nuclear systems. A flexible and agile nuclear weapons complex is a key to this step. The Obama Administration laudably increased funding for the nuclear enterprise after the New Strategic Arms Reduction Treaty (New START) ratification. The funding levels must be sustained now, and increased in the future, in order to meet the needs of a credible survivable deterrent vis-à-vis a growing threat.

- Stop unilateral nuclear weapons reductions. The New START data declarations show that the United States disproportionately reduced the number of its nuclear warheads since the treaty was signed. The latest State Department data exchange, from September 1, 2016, shows that Russia currently deploys 400 more nuclear warheads than the U.S. The trend must be reversed, as a perception of nuclear superiority emboldens Russia’s aggressive foreign policies that are detrimental to U.S. interests in Europe and in the Middle East.

- Withdraw from New START. Moscow has demonstrated that it is not interested in a benign relationship with the United States. Its massive nuclear weapons modernization investments and deployments defeat the purpose of New START, which has outlived its utility under current conditions.

- Withdraw from the Intermediate Range Nuclear Forces (INF) Treaty. Russia is currently in a material breach of the INF Treaty, developing capabilities that directly threaten North Atlantic Treaty Organization allies and the U.S. ability to defend them. At this point in time, the United States is the only party restricted by the treaty.

- Maintain nuclear ambiguity. Nuclear ambiguity—lack of specificity with regard to the scenarios under which the United States would use a nuclear weapon—has served as reliable deterrence over the past several decades. The policy should be continued and re-affirmed.

- Move away from the policy of Mutually Assured Destruction (MAD). In today’s world with multiple nuclear powers, relying on a deterrence that leaves something to chance is not a viable nuclear strategy. For one, unlike the United States that values its way of life and its people, some U.S. adversaries are not concerned with saving the lives of the people they rule. They care about their own survival and about the survival of tools that help them in power. This means that the United States needs an individualized and potentially different set of nuclear and conventional capabilities and strategies in order to threaten the things that its adversaries value. A uniform Cold War approach is not a fitting or prudent strategy for today’s rapidly changing environment.

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Reverse the Obama Administration policy of “three nos.” In an effort to decrease the role of nuclear weapons in U.S. national security strategy, the Obama Administration instituted a policy of (1) no new nuclear warheads, (2) no new military missions, and (3) no new military capabilities for the existing weapons. This policy assumes that U.S. adversaries are and will be deterred the same way that U.S. adversaries were deterred during the Cold War, when nuclear weapons in the current inventory were designed and deployed. The United States must be able to explore options for deterrence without artificial and obsolete policy restrictions.

Respect the Senate regarding the Comprehensive Test Ban Treaty (CTBT). Since the Senate rejected the CTBT in 1999, future President Trump should ask the Senate to return the CTBT to the executive branch. This step would effectively terminate any further consideration of the treaty ratification. Additionally, consistent with Article 18 of the Vienna Convention on the Law of Treaties, the Trump Administration should announce that it has no intention of ratifying the CTBT.

While the executive plays a pivotal role in guiding U.S. nuclear weapons policy, Congress plays an important role as well. To ensure that U.S. nuclear weapons policy is on a sound footing in the future, Congress should:

- Fund the U.S. nuclear weapons modernization program. Congress must work with the Administration to modernize aging nuclear platforms, maintain and extend the life of nuclear warheads, and revitalize the U.S. nuclear weapons complex.

- The Senate should return the CTBT to the executive branch. Since the Senate voted to reject ratification of the CTBT, a termination of any further consideration of the treaty’s ratification is a prudent step the Senate should take.

These steps will ensure that the United States continues to maintain safe, secure, and reliable nuclear weapons that credibly deter a whole range of potential adversaries in the decades ahead.

—Michaela Dodge is Senior Policy Analyst for Defense and Strategic Policy in the Center for National Defense, of the Kathryn and Shelby Cullom Davis Institute for National Security and Foreign Policy, at The Heritage Foundation.