

The Nuclear Posture Review Signals a New Arms Race

We need momentum for reducing nuclear weapons, not for “modernizing” them

By Katrina vanden Heuvel

The Pentagon released its 2018 Nuclear Posture Review February 2nd. Its debut demands more attention, because it announced a renewed round in the nuclear arms race, one inevitably bringing us ever closer to the unthinkable—a nuclear war of catastrophic consequences.

The review clearly seeks to calm fears about President Trump’s finger on the nuclear trigger. Ignoring the many accidents and close calls during the Cold War, the review asserts that the United States has “measures and protocols” to ensure that intercontinental ballistic missiles are “safe, secure and under constant control.” Furthermore, the Pentagon says that “any US decision to employ nuclear weapons would follow a deliberative process.” Despite these assurances, the review’s plans for the nuclear arsenal and nuclear strategy should rouse alarms and spark congressional hearings and public debate.

The United States has an active stockpile of more than 4,000 nuclear weapons, arrayed in the triad of land-based launch sites, nuclear submarines and strategic bombers, including nuclear armed ICBMs,

air- and sea-launched cruise missiles, and gravity bombs. More than enough to destroy the world several times over, the arsenal’s “credibility” is not in issue. Yet, the review reaffirms the Obama administration’s commitment to a new generation of missiles, nuclear submarines, strategic bombers and nuclear bombs. It warns of a “rapid deterioration of the threat environment,” making it imperative not to “delay modernization of our nuclear forces if we are to preserve a credible nuclear deterrent.”

The Trump administration goes beyond President Barack Obama’s buildup by enhancing “non-strategic” nuclear forces, that is, lower-yield nuclear bombs, on the order of those that destroyed Hiroshima and Nagasaki. The stated rationale is to correct an imaginary Russian misperception that greater capacity in this area could give them the possibility of successfully waging a limited nuclear war. The buildup will give the president—yes, Donald Trump—nuclear weapons that are theoretically more usable in a regional conflict.

The review hastens to reassure us that, in the mad logic of mutually assured destruction, the forward deployment of more usable low-yield nuclear weapons

will somehow raise, not lower, the “nuclear threshold.” The reality, though, as Physicians for Social Responsibility have detailed, is that even a “limited” regional exchange of nuclear weapons could leave more than a billion people facing starvation from reduced food stocks. A week-long “regional” war could kill more than died in the course of World War II.

The review reaffirms the United States is ready to use nuclear weapons first in an alarmingly wide range of scenarios. It remains “the policy of the United States to retain some ambiguity regarding the precise circumstances” that might lead to a nuclear response. The United States reserves the right to unleash nuclear weapons first in “extreme circumstances” to defend the “vital interests” not only of the United States but also of its “allies and partners”—a total of some 30 countries. “Extreme circumstances,” the review states explicitly, include “significant non-nuclear attacks,” including conventional attacks on “allied or partner civilian population or infrastructure.” The United States also maintains a “portion of its nuclear forces” on daily alert, with the option of launching those forces “promptly.”

As for arms treaties, the review states that the United States will continue to comply with the Comprehensive Nuclear Test Ban Treaty while refusing to sign it. The review explicitly reserves the right to resume “nuclear explosive testing” if “necessary to ensure the safety and effectiveness of the US nuclear arsenal.” The review admits that arms-control agreements can help “sustain strategic stability,” but concludes “further progress is difficult to envision.” The document ignores the UN Treaty on the Non-Proliferation of Nuclear Weapons, which obligates the United States and other nuclear power signatories to move toward nuclear disarmament. This comes as growing tensions between Russia and the United States are beginning to unravel agreements that do exist.

In sum, the United States is building a new generation of nuclear weapons and delivery systems, will deploy more usable nuclear weapons in “forward” areas, remains committed to possible “first use” of nuclear weapons even against non-nuclear attacks in defense of 30 countries, retains missiles on active alert ready to launch, is skeptical of the possibility of any progress in arms control, and is hostile to the global movement to make nuclear weapons illegal. All this as tensions with Russia and China rise, relations with North Korea remain literally explosive, and the nuclear deal with Iran stays under constant assault from the president.

Not surprisingly, the *Bulletin of the Atomic Scientists* recently adjusted its doomsday clock to two minutes to midnight, the highest level of alarm since 1953, when the Soviet Union exploded its first hydrogen bomb. In their statement, the scientists warned: “Major nuclear actors are on the cusp of a new arms race, one that will be very expensive and will increase the likelihood of accidents and misperceptions. Across the globe, nuclear weapons are poised to become more rather than less usable because of nations’ investments in their nuclear arsenals.”

Despite numerous close calls and false alarms, the world has avoided a nuclear war since the start of the Cold War. The Nuclear Posture Review suggests that nuclear weapons make violence less likely.

In reality, the world will either find a way to get rid of nuclear weapons completely or they will eventually be used, either intentionally or by mistake. This reality deserves greater attention in the media and Congress. We need to revive momentum for reducing nuclear weapons, not for “modernizing” them. As Beatrice Fihn, who accepted the Nobel Peace Prize on behalf of the International Campaign to Abolish Nuclear Weapons in 2017, stated in response to the review, “There are only two possible endings to this story: either the end of nuclear weapons or the end of us all.”

—Editor and publisher of the *Nation* magazine, Katrina vanden Heuvel writes a weekly column for *The Washington Post* which ran this piece Feb. 13.

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New Nuclear “Posture” Degrades National Security

The US government boycotted and denounced the treaty negotiations, despite the fact that there have long been similar bans on chemical and biological weapons which the US has supported.

With respect to North Korea, its ruling regime is clearly seeking deterrence against the US. North Korea’s infrastructure was completely destroyed during the Korean War, and its people later witnessed the destruction of the Iraqi and Libyan regimes—neither of which had nuclear weapons.

The NPR claims to be about “deterrence” against hostile threats, but nuclear weapons’ accuracy replaces deterrence with plans to conduct nuclear attacks, including pre-emptive first strikes. This is why the US and Russia keep thousands of nuclear weapons—instead of the few hundred that China, England, France, India, Pakistan, and Israel keep for retaliation. Improving the ability to use nuclear weapons is the reason for the \$1.7 trillion so-called “modernization” (a euphemism for developing new nuclear weapons), instead of retaining a few hundred, which are known to be “good” for 50 years.

Beyond preserving and upgrading US nuclear weapons, the NPR calls for:

1) Near-term development of a new “smaller” nuclear warhead for existing Trident missiles launched from new submarines;

2) New sub-launched nuclear-armed Cruise missiles;

3) Keeping the 1.2 megaton B83-1 nuclear gravity bomb (think: Hiroshima times 80) “until a suitable replacement is identified;”

4) Provide the enduring capability and capacity to produce plutonium ‘pits’ [warhead cores] at a rate of no fewer than 80 pits per year by 2030; and

5) Advancing the W78 warhead replacement and investigating the feasibility of fielding the nuclear warheads in a Navy missile.

Problems with these plans include:

1) Any belief in a “limited” or “low-yield nuclear war is a fallacy that shouldn’t be tested. Once the nuclear threshold is crossed at any level, lower-yield nuclear

weapons are all the more dangerous for being potentially more usable;

2) Being the perfect weapon for a nuclear first-strike or the proverbial “bolt out of the blue,” nuclear Cruise missiles are inherently destabilizing, as well as being redundant since they are already developed for heavy bombers;

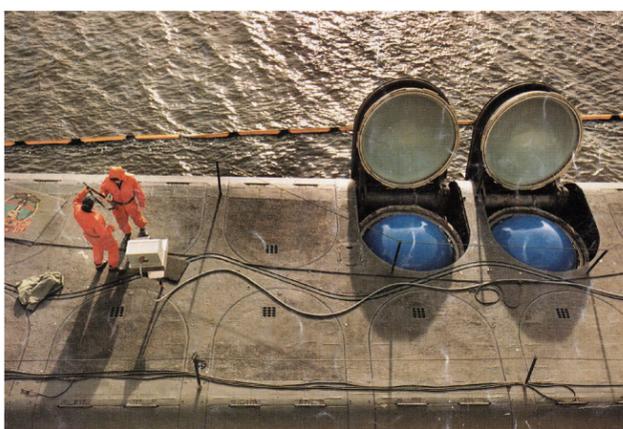
3) The National Nuclear Security Administration largely justified the ongoing program to create the B61-12 (the world’s first “smart” nuclear gravity bomb) by being a replacement for the 1.2 megaton B83-1 bomb. The NPR implies doubts about the \$13 billion B61-12 program and the B83’s possible retention;

4) To date, plans have indicated “up to 80 pits per year,” rather than “no fewer than” 80. And the 2015 Defense Authorization Act required that the capability to produce up to 80 pits per year be demonstrated by 2027. The NPR’s later date of 2030 could be indicative of long-standing plutonium pit production problems at the Los Alamos National Laboratory. In any event, future plutonium pit production is unnecessary since existing warheads are viable for 50 to 100 years. New pits can only be intended for future new-design nuclear weapons; and

5) “W78 warhead replacement... in a Navy flight vehicle” is code for the so-called Interoperable Warheads, whose planned three versions could cost around \$50 billion. These are arguably huge make-work projects for the nuclear weapons labs (particularly Livermore), which ironically the Navy

doesn’t even want. They are also driving the needless future production of “no fewer than” 80 new pits per year.

Jay Coghlan, Executive Director of Nuclear Watch New Mexico, said, “We need to eliminate the one class of weapons of mass destruction that can destroy our country. [The NPR] instead sets back arms control efforts and further hollows out our country by diverting more huge sums of money to the usual giant weapons contractors at the expense of public health, education, and environmental protection. Under Trump and this NPR, expect Medicare and social security to be attacked to help pay for a false sense of military superiority.”



One of 14 US *Trident* submarines, with two of its 24 nuclear missiles visible. A fleet of replacement subs will cost over \$313 billion.