

**Report on the Nuclear Employment Strategy
of the United States**

Submitted pursuant to 491(a) of Title 10, U.S. Code

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Introduction

On behalf of the President, and in accordance with 10 U.S.C., section 491 (Section 491), the Secretary of Defense is submitting this report on the Nuclear Employment Strategy of the United States. With the President's issuance of new nuclear weapons employment guidance, and in advance of implementation of this guidance through Department of Defense (DoD) military guidance and updated plans, this report fulfills the requirements of Section 491.

Background

The 2022 Nuclear Posture Review (NPR) established the Biden Administration's nuclear policy and posture. Building on the NPR, the President issued updated Nuclear Weapons Employment Planning Guidance of the United States (Guidance). This Guidance directly informs DoD's development of nuclear employment options for consideration by the President in extreme circumstances and establishes requirements that shape U.S. nuclear weapons capabilities and posture. Updating U.S. nuclear employment guidance is critical to ensuring that the Nation's nuclear forces, plans, and posture continue to adapt to a changing world.

Security Environment

The United States confronts multiple nuclear competitors, with each adversary presenting unique challenges for U.S. strategists to confront, stressing strategic stability in diverse ways, and complicating deterrence challenges around the globe. Russia poses an acute threat with its large, modern, and diversified nuclear arsenal of strategic and theater-range weapons as well as its pursuit of novel nuclear systems. It has demonstrated its willingness to brandish nuclear weapons to shield its illegal and dangerous behavior. The People's Republic of China (PRC) has embarked on an ambitious expansion, modernization, and diversification of its nuclear forces and established a nascent nuclear triad. The PRC's lack of transparency and growing military assertiveness raise questions regarding its intentions, nuclear strategy, and doctrine. The Democratic People's Republic of Korea (DPRK) also continues to expand, diversify, and improve its nuclear, ballistic missile, and non-nuclear capabilities.

Any one of these nuclear challenges would be formidable itself, but the evidence of growing collaboration and collusion between Russia, the PRC, the DPRK, and Iran makes the situation even more challenging. There is a possibility of coordinated or opportunistic aggression by a combination of adversaries in a crisis or conflict, which requires U.S. strategists to think carefully about complex escalation dynamics and deterring multiple adversaries simultaneously, including in extended crises or conflicts.

Updated Guidance

Because U.S. nuclear strategy and the U.S. nuclear deterrent remains flexible and resilient, the President's Guidance reflects more continuity than change with the approach of previous Administrations. Among other examples, the Guidance reaffirms that the President remains the sole authority to direct U.S. nuclear employment, and that the fundamental role of nuclear

weapons is to deter nuclear attack on the United States or its allies and partners. As the NPR notes, the United States would consider employing nuclear weapons only in extreme circumstances to defend the vital interests of the United States and its allies and partners.

Updated elements of the Guidance evolved from prior iterations by:

- Requiring that planning accounts for the new deterrence challenges posed by the growth, modernization, and increasing diversity of potential adversaries' nuclear arsenals;
- Directing that the United States be able to deter Russia, the PRC, and the DPRK simultaneously in peacetime, crisis, and conflict;
- Effectuating the 2022 NPR decision to rely on non-nuclear overmatch to deter regional aggression by Iran as long as Iran does not possess a nuclear weapon;¹
- Requiring the integration of non-nuclear capabilities into U.S. nuclear planning where non-nuclear capabilities can support the nuclear deterrence mission;
- Stressing the importance of managing escalation in U.S. planning for responding to limited strategic attack; and
- Enabling deeper consultation, coordination, and combined planning with NATO and Indo-Pacific allies and partners in order to strengthen U.S. extended deterrence commitments.

Guiding Principles

The Guidance is consistent with U.S. declaratory policy as articulated in the 2022 NPR. As long as nuclear weapons exist, the fundamental role of U.S. nuclear weapons is to deter nuclear attack on the United States or its allies and partners. The roles of nuclear weapons in United States strategy are to deter strategic attack, assure allies and partners, and enable achievement of national objectives in extreme circumstances if deterrence fails.² These roles are interrelated and complementary and provide the basis for developing and assessing U.S. nuclear strategies, policies, and capabilities. They also undergird all U.S. national defense priorities.

The United States will not use or threaten to use nuclear weapons against non-nuclear weapon states that are party to the Nuclear Nonproliferation Treaty (NPT) and in compliance with their nuclear non-proliferation obligations. For all other states, there remains a narrow range of contingencies in which U.S. nuclear weapons may still play a role in deterring attacks that have strategic effect against the United States or its allies and partners.

U.S. nuclear strategy can best be described as tailored deterrence with flexible capabilities. Deterrence is at its core an effort to influence an adversary's decision calculus. As such, U.S. strategy to deter a potential adversary is a function of the unique characteristics of that adversary - from its geopolitical goals to leaders' perceptions, to strategy, doctrine and capabilities.

¹ The United States remains resolved to prevent Iran from developing a nuclear weapon and is prepared to use all elements of national power to ensure that outcome.

² Strategic attack is defined as a nuclear attack of any scale as well as a significant, high-consequence, non-nuclear attack that has strategic-level effect.

Planning Guidance

Planning for nuclear operations supports deterrence on a daily basis, and provides options to the President in extreme circumstances. The Guidance continues to direct that DoD planning focus on only those objectives and missions that are necessary in the evolving security environment. It also instructs that the United States seek to end any conflict at the lowest level of damage possible on the best achievable terms for the United States and its allies and partners.

The Guidance requires DoD to conduct both deliberate and adaptive nuclear planning. Deliberate nuclear plans are tailored to deter and, if necessary, achieve objectives against specified nuclear-armed adversaries that pose a potential strategic threat to the United States and its allies and partners. All deliberate nuclear employment plans must contain the flexibility to tailor each response to the unique circumstances that would surround any nuclear crisis. Adaptive nuclear planning would be implemented as needed in a crisis or conflict to tailor deterrence operations and employment options in accordance with the emerging circumstances of a contingency.

Adaptive nuclear planning is required to facilitate integration with non-nuclear planning; support a flexible, responsive, and tailored nuclear strategy; and enable effective employment of nuclear weapons in a conflict. Deliberate plans are routinely reviewed by DoD's senior leadership, and adaptive planning is regularly exercised.

The Guidance continues to emphasize the need to, first and foremost, hold at risk what adversaries value most. It also reiterates the need to maintain counterforce capabilities to reduce potential adversaries' ability to employ nuclear weapons against the United States and its allies and partners, and does not rely on a counter-value or minimum-deterrence approach. The Guidance also requires that all nuclear plans must be consistent with the Law of Armed Conflict, which regulates the conduct of war. It reaffirms that the United States will continue the practice of not targeting any country on a day-to-day basis and instead relies on open-ocean targeting. It also instructs DoD to continue to minimize the number of nuclear weapons needed to achieve objectives.

While recognizing that nuclear weapons continue to provide unique deterrence effects that no other element of U.S. military power can replace, the Guidance places greater emphasis on the use of non-nuclear capabilities to support the nuclear deterrence mission, where feasible. Such integration allows the Joint Force to combine nuclear and non-nuclear capabilities in complementary ways that leverage the individual characteristics of diverse forces. Further, allies can contribute to nuclear deterrence by alleviating burdens on U.S. conventional or dual-capable forces, or by augmenting their own conventional support to enable U.S. nuclear operations in a contingency.

The Guidance requires that all plans for responding to limited nuclear attack or significant, high-consequence non-nuclear attack that has strategic-level effect include an associated concept for favorably managing escalation, including reducing the likelihood of a large-scale nuclear attack against the United States or its allies and partners. This escalation management is increasingly important as the operating environment becomes more complex and creates the possibility of pathways for conflict escalation that may not be well understood or easy to predict.

Nuclear Force Levels and Posture

The requirement to develop and maintain a tailored deterrence strategy in support of both deliberate and adaptive nuclear planning in a dynamic security environment requires nuclear capabilities that are highly flexible and that can support a wide range of employment options.

To enable this tailored strategy, the United States is committed to retaining a nuclear Triad of strategic systems, capabilities suited to deter and respond to limited nuclear employment, and a modern and enduring nuclear command, control, and communication (NC3) system. The Triad provides mutually supporting attributes that, taken together, best maintain strategic stability while mitigating programmatic, technical, geopolitical, or operational risk. The United States also retains capabilities, such as dual-capable fighter aircraft, that contribute to deterrence of regional conflict and limited nuclear employment.

Modern, flexible, and tailorable U.S. nuclear forces are key to assuring allies and partners that the United States is committed to and capable of deterring the range of strategic threats that they face, and contribute to U.S. nonproliferation goals by convincing allies and partners that they do not need to pursue their own nuclear capabilities. Meeting this goal requires continuing to modernize U.S. nuclear forces and NC3 capabilities, and to sustaining legacy nuclear capabilities and NC3 systems until their modern replacements are fielded. It also requires a nuclear enterprise capable of managing geopolitical, technological, operational, and programmatic risks.

The United States will retain nuclear forces at current readiness levels unless circumstances warrant a change: intercontinental ballistic missiles (ICBMs) on day-to-day alert, and a portion of ballistic missile submarines at sea day-to-day. Other nuclear forces, including nuclear-capable bombers, remain in various stages of readiness. This combination of alert postures and capabilities contributes to strategic stability.

All U.S. nuclear systems are subject to multiple layers of control, and the United States maintains rigorous procedural and technical safeguards to prevent misinformed, accidental, or unauthorized launch. In all cases, the United States will maintain a human "in the loop" for all actions critical to informing and executing decisions by the President to initiate and terminate nuclear weapons employment.

While the United States maintains the capability to launch nuclear forces under conditions of an ongoing nuclear attack, it does not depend on a launch-under-attack policy to ensure a credible response. The Guidance instructs DoD to continue to prioritize reducing any potential pressure to launch nuclear forces while under attack.

In an evolving security environment with multiple adversaries who are making nuclear weapons more central to their national security strategies, it may be necessary to adapt current U.S. force capability, posture, composition, or size in order to be able to fulfill the three stated roles of nuclear weapons. The Guidance instructs DoD to continuously evaluate whether adjustments should be made, considering a number of relevant factors, and, when appropriate, make recommendations to the President.

Arms Control, Risk Reduction and Strategic Stability

The Guidance reinforces that deterrence alone will not address strategic dangers. Arms control, risk reduction, and nuclear nonproliferation play indispensable roles as well. Together, these are mutually reinforcing tools for preserving stability, increasing predictability, deterring aggression and escalation, reducing the consequences if deterrence fails, and mitigating the risk of nuclear arms racing and nuclear war.

The United States will abide by the central limits of the New START Treaty for the duration of the Treaty as long as it assesses that Russia continues to do so. The United States is also committed to future arms control with its nuclear-armed competitors, understanding that progress requires willing partners who are committed to reducing risks and who understand that managing rivalry through arms control is preferable to unrestrained competition.

The types of limits that the United States will consider in future negotiations will be influenced by the actions and trajectories of other nuclear-armed actors. Future bilateral agreements or arrangements with Russia, for example, will need to account for U.S. deterrence requirements and other strategic threats globally.