

Pentagon to Allow Nuclear Responses to Non-Nuclear Attacks

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Amid the media frenzy surrounding the Nunes-Trump memo, the Pentagon officially released its 2018 Nuclear Posture Review (NPR) last week. The NPR calls for the development of leaner, meaner nuclear weapons and lowers the threshold for the use of nukes. Donald Trump must be thrilled. During the presidential campaign, he questioned a senior foreign policy adviser about nuclear weapons three times during a briefing, asking, "If we have them why can't we use them?"



The NPR calls for "low-yield" nuclear weapons on submarine-launched ballistic missiles -- weapons that could cause as much damage as the bombs the United States dropped on Hiroshima and Nagasaki.

For the first time, the new NPR states that the United States could use nuclear weapons in response to non-nuclear attacks, including cyberattacks, in "extreme circumstances to defend the vital interests of the United States, its allies and partners." This new strategy opens the door to first-use of nuclear weapons, which is [prohibited](#) under international law.

In its 1996 advisory opinion, the International Court of Justice (ICJ) concluded that while the use of nuclear weapons might be lawful when used in self-defense if the survival of the nation were at stake, a first-strike use would not be.

The ICJ held in its "Legality of the Threat or Use of Nuclear Weapons" case that "the threat or use of nuclear weapons would generally be contrary to the rules of international law applicable in armed conflict, and in particular the principles and rules of humanitarian law."

"However," the IJC continued, "the Court cannot conclude definitively whether the threat or use of nuclear weapons would be lawful or unlawful in an extreme circumstance of self-defence, in which the very survival of a State would be at stake."

Framing Russia and China as Nuclear Threats

Russia, China and North Korea are singled out as potential nuclear threats in the NPR. The document "erroneously states that the United States needs new nuclear weapons because 'China is expanding and modernizing its considerable nuclear forces' and is pursuing 'entirely new nuclear capabilities,'" according to the [Union of Concerned Scientists](#) (UCS).

Gregory Kulacki, China project manager at the UCS Global Security Program and author of the UCS's newly released white paper, said, "There is no evidence that nuclear weapons are becoming more prominent in China's military strategy or that China has changed its longstanding no-first-use policy."

The NPR has alarmed foreign leaders. Mohammad Javad Zarif, foreign minister of Iran, tweeted that the NPR brings "humankind closer to annihilation." The United States is "shamelessly threatening Russia with a new atomic weapon," Iranian president Hassan Rouhani stated. "The same people who supposedly believe that using weapons of mass destruction is a crime against humanity are talking about new weapons to threaten or use against rivals," he added.

Ren Guoqiang, a spokesman for the Chinese defense ministry, said in a statement, "We hope the US side will discard its 'cold-war mentality,' [and] shoulder its own special and primary responsibility for nuclear disarmament."

Both Beijing and Moscow reaffirmed that nuclear weapons are not "first strike" weapons. Russia's Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov stressed that nuclear weapons are only a defensive deterrent. He listed the following "entirely defensive scenarios" for the threshold use of nuclear weapons: "in response to an act of aggression against Russia and (or) against our allies if nuclear or other types of mass destruction weapons are used, and also ... with use of conventional arms but only in case our state's very existence would be in danger."

Where Is This Coming From?

Keith Payne, president of the National Institute for Public Policy, was one of the key drafters of the NPR. In 1980, Payne astoundingly claimed in *Foreign Policy* that the United States could win a nuclear war with the Soviet Union. US casualties, Payne argued, could be limited to "approximately 20 million people," which, he called, "a level compatible with national survival and recovery."

Derek Johnson, executive director of Global Zero, the international movement for the elimination of nuclear weapons, said in a [statement](#) that the NPR is "a radical plan written by extreme elements and nuclear ideologues in Trump's inner circle who believe nuclear weapons are a wonder drug that can solve our national security challenges. They aren't and they can't."

Indeed, a retired senior Army officer [told](#) *The American Conservative* that the lower-yield warheads give Trump "a kind of gateway drug for nuclear war."

"This plan would be troubling under any Administration," Johnson observed, "but given this President's consistent and unabashed displays of ignorance, ballistic tendencies and dehumanizing world views, we should all be on red alert." Johnson expressed support for legislation that would restrict the first use of nuclear weapons.

Sixteen senators [wrote](#) in a letter to Trump on January 29, "[Y]our NPR would undermine decades of U.S. leadership on efforts to reduce and eventually eliminate the existential threat posed by nuclear weapons."

The senators noted that the NPR fails to mention Article VI of the 1968 Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty (NPT), which enshrines a commitment "to pursue negotiations in good faith on effective measures relating to the cessation of the nuclear arms race at an early date and to nuclear disarmament." The United States is a party to the NPT.

A "senior nuclear thinker and NPR critic" explained how the document's recommendations were developed. "[T]he story you won't hear is how this really came about," he told The American Conservative. "One day, Sean Hannity got on television and talked about how we need more nuclear weapons and Donald Trump heard this and went over to the Pentagon and presto, we got Keith Payne and his crew. That's the truth, and that's what got us to where we are."

Apparently, Hannity, whose hype on Fox News about the Nunes-Trump memo continues to poison the national debate, is becoming Trump's main foreign policy guru.

Sixty percent of Americans don't trust Trump with nuclear weapons, according to a recent NBC News/Washington Post poll.

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