



Biden’s Nuclear Posture Review Fuels the New Nuclear Arms Race

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Santa Fe, NM– Today, the Biden Administration has released its long awaited unclassified Nuclear Posture Review. It headlines a “Comprehensive, balanced approach to defending vital national security interests and reducing nuclear dangers.” It also declares that “deterrence alone will not reduce nuclear dangers.”

“Deterrence” against others has always been the publicly sold rationale for the United States’ nuclear weapons stockpile. First, there is the inconvenient fact that the U.S. was the first and only to use nuclear weapons in war. But secondly, the United States and the USSR (now Russia) never possessed their huge stockpiles for the sole purpose of deterrence anyway. Instead, their nuclear weapons policies have always been a hybrid of deterrence and nuclear war fighting, which threatens global annihilation to this very day.

As a pertinent example, after the Obama Administration released its 2010 Nuclear Posture Review, the Defense Department declared that, “...[t]he new guidance requires the United States to maintain significant counterforce capabilities against potential adversaries. The new guidance does not rely on a ‘counter-value’ or ‘minimum deterrence’ strategy.”¹ In simple language, that means nuclear war-fighting that could end civilization should deterrence fail, or even possible first strike. That is why we have thousands of nuclear weapons instead of just the few hundred needed for only deterrence. That is why we have the massive, \$1.7 trillion “modernization” program that will keep nuclear weapons forever, for which Biden’s Nuclear Posture Review gives added policy foundation.

The irony of the release of this new Nuclear Posture Review during the anniversary of the Cuban Missile Crisis should not be overlooked. Exactly sixty years ago we were facing potential global nuclear Armageddon, which President Biden himself has invoked to describe the war in Ukraine today. Robert McNamara, Defense Secretary during the Cuban Missile Crisis, said we survived that crisis only by luck.

Biden’s Review goes on to say that “The United States will pursue a comprehensive and balanced approach that places a renewed emphasis on arms control, non-proliferation and risk reduction to strengthen stability, head off costly arms races, and signal the desire to reduce the salience of nuclear weapons globally.”

But the fact is that we are in a deadly nuclear arms race now, fueled by the nuclear weapons states' exorbitantly expensive modernization programs. Moreover, since 2015 the Review Conferences of the 1970 NonProliferation Treaty, commonly regarded as the cornerstone of global nonproliferation, have utterly failed to make any progress whatsoever toward the global nuclear disarmament pledged to by the nuclear weapons states more than a half-century ago. Instead, the nuclear weapons states condemn the new Treaty on the Prohibition of Nuclear Weapons (TPNW), signed by 122 countries and ratified by 68.

However, it was the frustration of the non-weapons states over the nuclear powers' lack of commitment to the NonProliferation Treaty's mandate for nuclear disarmament that led to the conception of the ban treaty to begin with. Biden's Nuclear Posture Review declares that the "United States does not share the underlying assumption of the TPNW that the elimination of nuclear weapons can be achieved irrespective of the prevailing international security environment." But this begs the question of when? Why didn't the United States and other nuclear weapons powers honor the NPT's mandate to "enter into serious negotiations leading to nuclear disarmament" after the end of the Cold War? The simple answer is because they never intend to, which Biden's Nuclear Posture Review affirms and perpetuates.

Concerning the National Nuclear Security Administration's nuclear weapons production complex, Biden's Nuclear Posture Review states:

"For most of the post-Cold War period, the focus of our nuclear security enterprise has been to sustain existing nuclear weapons... When aging issues were identified in the stockpile, weapons were partially refurbished without changing their military characteristics... Today, much of the stockpile has aged without comprehensive refurbishment. At a time of rising nuclear risks, a partial refurbishment strategy no longer serves our interest. A safe, secure, and effective deterrent requires modern weapons and a modern infrastructure."

This is misleading and, of course, a prescription for nuclear weapons forever, with the United States building new production plants expected to be operational until ~2080. Contrary to what the NPR says above, there have been extensive modifications and "Life Extension Programs" that have extended the service lives of existing nuclear weapons for decades while indeed giving them new military characteristics (for example, the earth-penetrating B61-11 and far more accurate W76-1 warheads). The goal of the United States "modernization" program is not to preserve the safety and reliability of the existing, reliable, extensively tested stockpile. Instead, it is to produce speculative new designs that can't be tested because of the global testing moratorium, or worse yet may prompt the U.S. to resume testing.

Key to all this is the future expanded production of plutonium "pit" bomb cores that may substantially deviate from tested legacy designs. This is despite the fact that the United States already has at least 15,000 existing pits in storage, while independent experts have concluded that pits have service lifetimes of at least a century (their average age is now

around 40). NNSA is pursuing a two-site strategy of future pit production at the Los Alamos National Laboratory (LANL) in northern New Mexico and the Savannah River Site (SRS) in South Carolina. However, that program is plagued by delays and cost overruns at both sites.

Of notable interest, Trump's 2018 Nuclear Posture Review was very specific that NNSA must "Provide the enduring capability and capacity to produce plutonium pits at a rate of no fewer than 80 pits per year by 2030. A delay in this would result in the need for a higher rate of pit production at higher cost." It did not specify the two site strategy. But conversely, Biden's Nuclear Posture Review specifies the two-site strategy while omitting any numerical rate of production or date.

This may reflect built in wiggle room for the ongoing delays, cost overruns and programmatic challenges at both LANL and SRS. Any added delay at SRS, which is appearing more likely, will likely have a boomerang effect on LANL, forcing the Lab to produce more pit more quickly, despite its checkered nuclear safety track record. Meanwhile, NNSA refuses to conduct a nation-wide programmatic environmental impact statement (PEIS) on expanded plutonium pit production, as the National Environmental Policy Act arguably requires, while insisting that an outdated 2008 PEIS that did not consider simultaneous production at two sites is sufficient. Moreover, NNSA appears primed to omit analysis of expanded pit production in a new LANL site-wide environmental impact statement, instead presenting it as part of a done deal in a "No Action Alternative."

Two bright spots in Biden's Nuclear Posture Review are cancellation of the Sea-Launched Cruise Missile (SLCM) and nuclear warhead and announced retirement of the huge 1.2 megaton B83 bomb. That said, the SLCM and perhaps the B83 are likely to be retained if Republicans gain control of the House and/or Senate.

Jay Coghlan commented, "This new Review is an improvement from Trump's, but only at the margins. At its core, Biden's Nuclear Posture Review pays lip service to arms control while proceeding full steam ahead with the massive nuclear weapons modernization program that will help fuel the new nuclear arms race."

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¹ Report on Nuclear Employment Strategy of the United States Specified in Section 491 of 10. U.S.C.

Department of Defense, June 2013, page 4 (quotation marks in the original), <https://www.globalsecurity.org/wmd/library/policy/dod/us-nuclear-employment-strategy.pdf>

This press release will be available at <https://nukewatch.org/press-release-item/bidens-nuclear-posture-review-fuels-new-nuclear-arms-race/>