



Forum for American Leadership

Nuclear Posture Review: First, Do No Harm

March 29, 2022

President Biden used an emergency meeting with NATO Heads of State to announce that he would soon issue a revised “declaratory policy” as part of his [Administration’s Nuclear Posture Review \(NPR\)](#). Declaratory policy is, in essence, the stated conditions in which the President – the sole authority for the employment of the U.S. nuclear deterrent – would use this force.

Unfortunately, the policy announced by the President will not lead to any reciprocal action by America’s arms racing adversaries – namely, Russia and China, with aspiring nuclear weapons states like North Korea and Iran waiting in the wings – while it will create unnecessary confusion and doubt in America’s network of allies.

Nuclear Weapons Declaratory Policy and the Biden NPR

- In the Administration’s [Interim National Security Strategy](#), released in March 2021, the White House announced that the Administration would “take steps to reduce the role of nuclear weapons in our national security strategy.”
- Reducing the role of nuclear weapons in U.S. defense strategy can take many forms, but in this instance, President Biden chose to revert to President Obama’s 2010-era declaratory policy.
- That policy emphasizes that the “fundamental role” of U.S. nuclear weapons is to deter nuclear threats, rather than both nuclear and non-nuclear threats. The announced retreat to the Obama Administration formulation of “fundamental purpose” is a fulfillment of that interim strategy, and a reversal of the previous Administration’s effort to strengthen deterrence and extended deterrence, and, in particular, the assurance of the more than 30 countries that have forsworn their own nuclear weapons in favor of relying on the U.S. nuclear umbrella.
- The [2018 Nuclear Posture Review](#) (NPR) articulated four roles for U.S. nuclear weapons, including deterring strategic nonnuclear attacks. Biden’s new statement, in contrast, may suggest to some allies that using U.S. nuclear weapons to deter major conventional, chemical, or biological attacks on the U.S. homeland or on our allies is no longer a role for U.S. nuclear weapons.
- The 2018 NPR revised the Obama-era declaratory policy language by making clear the circumstances in which the U.S. may choose to respond to an attack on it or its allies, e.g., attacks on U.S. or allied civilian populations or infrastructure, attacks on nuclear forces, or attacks on warning and attack assessment capabilities. These changes by the prior Administration were [welcomed by America’s allies](#).
- At least for President Obama, his NPR in 2010 preceded the use of chemical weapons by Russia (two times), by Syria (multiple times, acknowledged by the international community), by North Korea (an assassination in a public airport), the Russian-precipitated demise of the most significant arms control agreement of the Cold War (the INF Treaty), and the stupendous nuclear weapons arms racing of Communist

China. The Biden Administration's decision stands in the face of these grave national security threats.

- For nearly the entirety of the Biden administration, [allied governments in both Europe and Asia have been urging](#) the United States not to change America's nuclear weapons declaratory policy.
- Last fall, the Biden administration [sent a survey to America's more than 30 formal allies](#) asking how they would respond to a change to US declaratory policy. All expressed deep concern. None were in favor.
- President Biden, who ran for office on a mantra of rebuilding America's alliances, chose not to heed those requests. Revealing that choice at a NATO meeting during a war on NATO's borders is nothing more than tone deaf.

Anticipating the Consequences

- As Russia prepared to invade Ukraine for the second time, it made the decision to [move up an annual nuclear weapons exercise](#) to coincide with that new aggression. As part of this exercise, [Putin supervised](#) the launch of numerous nuclear-capable missile systems, including so-called hypersonic missiles. He exercised his ballistic missile submarine fleet. The message was clear.
- Three weeks ago, one day before a planned March 3rd test of one of America's 50-year-old Minuteman III land-based intercontinental ballistic missiles, the Biden Administration reportedly postponed that launch, for fear of how it could be interpreted in Moscow.
- Two weeks later, as Putin's poorly-trained military floundered in its invasion, the Kremlin spokesman chose to remind the world of Russia's nuclear might by gratuitously offering that Putin would of course consider use of his nuclear weapons in the face of an "[existential threat](#)".
- Biden's restraint in the face of Moscow's threats was interpreted clearly: Moscow has deterred Washington with its nuclear threats to such a degree that [the United States was unwilling to conduct a routine unarmed reliability test of its nuclear deterrent](#).
- And now the Administration has responded again by further reducing the role of America's nuclear weapons in the face of nuclear threats and a major war in Europe.
- The message to would-be belligerents in Beijing, Pyongyang, or Tehran is clear: make clear nuclear threats as you pursue your aggressive foreign policy aims and America and the West won't dare to challenge you.

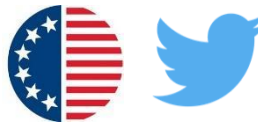
What's Next?

- As the Administration finalizes its nuclear posture review, the Biden Administration has reportedly been [considering terminating development](#) of the sea-launched cruise missile-nuclear (SLCM-N) and removing the W76-2 low yield warhead from submarine-launched ballistic missiles.
- These capabilities were proposed by the 2018 NPR for the very purpose of deterring Russian nuclear threats to Europe, not to mention China's nuclear advantage in the Indo-Pacific.

- The Administration may also seek to prematurely retire the B-83 gravity bomb (America's only remaining Megaton class nuclear weapon). [Russia](#) and [China](#) both maintain numerous Megaton-class nuclear weapons.
- Cutting these weapons at a time when Putin is nuclear saber rattling in Europe would signal to Putin that his threats are working, and that the U.S. is being deterred. It would also telegraph weakness to our allies, who may question our extended deterrence commitments. Lastly, it weakens our hand in any future arms control negotiations the Administration may seek to pursue with Russia or China or both.
- There is little that Congress can do to reverse a President's nuclear weapons declaratory policy – these are the President's weapons, only he can employ them. However, Congress can ensure funding is provided in the fiscal year 2023 authorization and appropriations acts for any U.S. nuclear weapons capabilities the Administration may seek to cut.
- This declaratory policy will likely be quickly changed by a new Administration. Congress should clearly message support for allies newly in doubt of the security of the U.S. nuclear weapons umbrella.

As Russian, North Korean, and Chinese nuclear threats are growing, the Biden Administration should be asking what more should we do to strengthen deterrence, not what cuts can be made. The United States and its allies can't afford for Russia to think it can continue its aggressive nuclear rhetoric and modernization programs without U.S. response, nor can China and North Korea be allowed to believe that even amidst a sea change in nuclear threats, the United States is willing to cast aside legitimate allied concerns to pursue high-minded rhetoric to supposedly reduce nuclear dangers.

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