

# Washington prepares to deploy “usable” nuclear weapons

By Bill Van Auken  
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A Nuclear Posture Review that the Trump administration plans to roll out after the US President’s State of the Union address later this month will introduce a significant break with past policy in proposing the development of a new class of low-yield, “usable” nuclear weapons, those familiar with the document report.

While a massive \$1.3 trillion, 30-year scheme to refurbish all the elements of the US nuclear “triad”—intercontinental ballistic missiles, submarine-launched ballistic missiles and strategic bombers—was introduced under the Obama administration, it had long been stated US policy not to build new types of nuclear warheads.

The former special assistant to the Obama administration on arms control and nonproliferation Jon Wolfsthal has told the media that he has seen what appeared to be a final draft of the review, which calls for the development and deployment of a modified version of the Trident D5 submarine-launched missile.

While the D5 missiles—which each cost approximately \$66 million—carry warheads with over 30 times the destructive power of the bomb dropped on Hiroshima in 1945, the new weapons would include only the primary fission section of existing thermonuclear warheads, with a lower explosive yield.

The development of the new tactical nuclear weapons would represent a direct violation of the Intermediate-Range Nuclear Forces (INF) treaty reached between Washington and Moscow in 1987. The Pentagon is justifying the breach of the treaty with the claim that the Russian military is already in violation of the treaty because of its development of a new ground-launched cruise missile.

The Nuclear Posture Review (NPR) would be the first such revision of US policy on the use of the

world’s most horrific weapons of mass destruction to be carried out in eight years.

Like the one carried out under Obama, the new review does not rule out a US nuclear first strike. The new NPR, however, also raises the prospect of the US using nuclear weapons in response to nonnuclear attacks.

In this regard, it merely makes explicit the position put forward in the National Security Strategy released last month which called for the preparation for conflict with China and Russia, which it defined as “revisionist powers” seeking to challenge US global hegemony. The document stated, “While nuclear deterrence strategies cannot prevent all conflict, they are essential to prevent nuclear attack, non-nuclear strategic attacks, and large-scale conventional aggression.”

Last September, Rob Soofer, the deputy assistant defense secretary for nuclear and missile defense policy, outlined an even broader range of triggers for a US nuclear attack, stating that the new review was considering how Washington could use nuclear weapons to “deter new non-nuclear attacks that could have strategic effects: catastrophic mass casualties, cyberattacks against US infrastructure, chemical or biological attacks, or attacks against US critical space capabilities.”

Soofer added that the new strategy under consideration envisioned “a broad range of forces of various ranges, various yields, some deployed in the theater, others employed from the United States, which can defeat Russia’s and China’s nuclear strategy.”

The overriding rationale for the development of the new “usable” Trident submarine-based cruise missiles is reportedly the Pentagon’s contention that should the increasingly tense situation created by NATO’s buildup of military forces on Russia’s western border

boil over into an armed conflict, Moscow would use low-yield tactical nuclear weapons with the expectation that the US would not respond with an all-out thermonuclear attack. The theory, apparently, is that the new missile would allow the US military to respond in kind.

There has been no evidence produced by anyone that Moscow is committed to a wildly adventurist policy of launching tactical nuclear weapons against US forces based on the assumption that Washington would not unleash its nuclear arsenal in response.

Rather, the turn in US policy is toward developing weapons that would allow Washington to initiate a so-called “limited” nuclear war in pursuit of its global aims. The effect of the use of even a small number of such weapons would be catastrophic and, in all likelihood, would unleash a global nuclear conflagration.

The turn toward preparations for nuclear war with Russia is all the more extraordinary in that it is unfolding in the context of the ongoing investigation by special counsel Robert Mueller into allegations of “collusion” between the Trump campaign and Moscow in the 2016 election along with a virulent campaign by the Democratic Party to indict the Trump White House as too soft on Russia.

The Democratic caucus on the Senate Foreign Relations Committee Tuesday released a minority report describing Russia as a “complex and growing threat” and accusing the Putin government of engaging in a “relentless assault to undermine democracy and the rule of law” in the US and Europe.

It continued by indicting Trump for failing to respond to Russia in the manner his predecessors in the White House had “following attacks like Pearl Harbor and 9/11.” The clear implication is that the Democratic Party is demanding a more aggressive preparation for a military confrontation between the world’s two largest nuclear powers.

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