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5 on 45: Are Trump's nuclear ambitions feasible?

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PITA: You're listening to 5 on 45 from the Brookings Podcast Network, analysis and commentary from Brookings experts on today's news regarding the Trump administration.

PIFER: I'm Steven Pifer, a non-resident senior fellow with the Foreign Policy program at Brookings. On February 2nd, the Pentagon released the Trump administration's Nuclear Posture Review, something that administrations have done since the 1990s.

The Nuclear Posture Review describes the role the administration sees for nuclear weapons in U.S. national security policy, and the specific weapons systems it believes necessary to support that policy. In order to maintain a safe, secure, and effective nuclear deterrent, the United States has to modernize its strategic triad of submarine-launched ballistic missiles, land-based intercontinental ballistic missiles, and strategic bombers as older systems age out. However, while it has significant elements of continuity with the 2010 Obama administration's nuclear posture review, the Trump review adopts dramatically different directions on several issues which raise questions about policy-specific systems and affordability.

Question number one, should the United States rely more on nuclear weapons? The numbers and types of nuclear weapons in the U.S. arsenal have declined sharply over the past 40 years. In 2010, the Obama administration adopted the explicit goal of reducing both the number and the role of nuclear weapons in U.S. national security strategy. The Trump Nuclear Posture Review takes a different approach. It notes correctly the return of great power competition and that Russia and China are increasing their reliance on nuclear arms.

Like the 2010 review, the Trump administration's Nuclear Posture Review states that U.S. nuclear weapons would be used only in extreme circumstances, but it broadens the definition of extreme circumstances to include certain non-nuclear strategic attacks. Is it wise for Washington to follow other nuclear powers and increase its reliance on nuclear arms? Previous presidents moved towards less reliance because

they recognized the limited utility of nuclear weapons in all but the most dire of situations and sought an American comparative advantage in high tech conventional weapons.

Question number two, does the United States need small nuclear weapons? Citing a gap in capabilities, the Trump Nuclear Posture Review calls for more low-yield nuclear options. It proposes a nuclear armed sea launch cruise missile and a new warhead for some Trident submarine launched ballistic missiles. These are in addition to a new nuclear-armed air launched cruise missile called the LRSO which also will have low yield options.

The Nuclear Posture Review justifies the decision to add new low yield weapons in large part by reference to Russia. It expresses concern that Russia's panoply of non-strategic nuclear weapons with low yields could give Russia a course of advantage in a crisis and lowered the threshold for nuclear use. The answer the review suggests is to build more U.S. low yield nuclear weapons.

Getting them to a competition in low yield nuclear arms runs the risk of inadvertently signaling that use of low yield non-strategic nuclear weapons would be seen as somehow different from strategic weapons, and somehow might be acceptable. That is not a good idea. It is profoundly in the American interest that in a conflict nuclear weapons not be used. It would be wiser to seek to raise the nuclear threshold to make clear to potential adversaries that a nuclear weapon is a nuclear weapon and no matter what its size, and that any use of nuclear weapons would fundamentally change the rules of conflict immediately opening a Pandora's box full of unpredictable, nasty, and potentially catastrophic consequences.

Question number three, what about the new nuclear systems proposed in the review? The new weapons noted in the Trump view raised particular questions. First, take the LRSO. A new nuclear launch cruise missiles seems redundant in view of the decision to produce the B-21 bomber which will have advanced stealth electronic warfare capabilities and should be able to operate against sophisticated air defenses. Second, it is not apparent what regional security problem a nuclear armed sea launch cruise missile would solve. The United States already has the capability to forward

deployed dual capable aircraft that can deliver nuclear bombs to regions around the world.

Third, the Nuclear Posture Review describes the low yield Trident warhead as bolstering US regional non-strategic nuclear capabilities. But this concept prompts questions. First, could a trident missile launch be misinterpreted. And second, a U.S. ballistic missile submarine can carry 20 Trident missiles typically with a total of 80 to 100 nuclear warheads. That is a sizable part of the U.S. strategic deterrent. Firing one missile to deliver a Yellow Eagled warhead would reveal the submarines location. Would the U.S. Navy want to risk that?

The fourth question is about affordability. The Congressional Budget Office estimated the cost of the Obama nuclear program at 400 billion dollars over the next 10 years. Officials in Obama's Pentagon candidly admitted that they had no idea where they would find that money, and that was without the additional nuclear arms that the Trump administration wants to build. The new review claims it needs only six point four percent of the Defense Department's annual budget. That is a nice talking point, but by itself it is not very meaningful. Lots of small percentages will add up to more than what Congress is prepared to spend on Defense. Even making the realistic assumption of no major cost overruns, implementing the nuclear posture review will prove very expensive. It will entail significant opportunity costs in the form of less money available for a conventional force readiness, new destroyers, and attack submarines, additional soldiers, and the like.

The United States has to modernize its nuclear deterrent, but it should do so prudently. It should avoid steps that could increase the chance of nuclear use, would add unneeded nuclear weapons, and would prove unaffordable or hollow out U.S. conventional forces. Congress and others should bear such questions in mind as they take a careful look at the Nuclear Posture Review, its recommendations, and its potential impact.

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