



FEBRUARY 2018

## Trump's Nuclear Posture Review: A New Rift between Europe and the US?

President Trump's recent Nuclear Posture Review lays out important policy changes with regard to US nuclear weapons. It broadens the circumstances in which the US may use nuclear weapons and aims for the introduction of new types of 'smaller' nuclear weapons. Both intentions may contribute to lowering the threshold for nuclear weapons use and blur the difference between nuclear and conventional weapons. These changes have direct effects on NATO's European member states and require an informed debate among policy makers as well as the general public in these states. This Policy Brief offers some considerations as input for such a debate.

After some delay, the United States Administration of President Donald Trump published its Nuclear Posture Review (NPR) on 2 February 2018. International security analysts were eagerly awaiting this publication, because of Trump's unprecedented rhetoric about nuclear weapons in previous public statements – he has been hinting at drastically increasing the number of US nuclear weapons as well as actually using them against adversaries. This Policy Brief analyses Trump's NPR with a special focus on its implications for European NATO member states and for international arms control efforts.

### The NPR: a brief analysis

At first sight, the 2018 Nuclear Posture Review (NPR) may seem quite similar to previous versions issued under the Presidents Barack Obama and George W. Bush. The overall aim of the US nuclear

weapons arsenal (deterrence) has not changed and, as in the past, it is stated that nuclear weapons will only be used in the 'most extreme circumstances'. Trump's NPR even reiterates the announcement made in Obama's NPR that the US '*will not use or threaten to use nuclear weapons against non-nuclear weapons states that are party to the Non-Proliferation Treaty (NPT) and in compliance with their nuclear non-proliferation obligations*'.<sup>1</sup> Yet, two important differences between the 2010 and 2018 NPR deserve close attention.

First, the 'most extreme circumstances' under which nuclear weapons could be used are broadened in this NPR. Obama's 2010 version mentioned the aim to '*reduce the role of nuclear weapons in deterring non-nuclear attacks, with the objective of making deterrence of nuclear attack on the United*

---

1 2018 Nuclear Posture Review, p. 21.

*States or our allies and partners the sole purpose of US nuclear weapons*.<sup>2</sup> In other words: nuclear weapons will be used to retaliate (and thus deter) nuclear attacks only. Trump's NPR, however, broadens the deterrent aim of the US nuclear arsenal. It should deter not only nuclear attacks by adversaries, but also several kinds of non-nuclear attacks. Nuclear weapons may be used, according to Trump's NPR, in response to '*significant non-nuclear strategic attacks*', including attacks on '*civilian population or infrastructure*'.<sup>3</sup> As was detailed in several analyses after a draft of the NPR was leaked<sup>4</sup>, this wording suggests that, for example, retaliation against massive cyber-attacks may also involve the use of nuclear weapons.<sup>5</sup> The NPR also raises the possibility of using nuclear weapons against any actor that '*supports or enables terrorist efforts to obtain or employ nuclear devices*'.<sup>6</sup> In short: Trump's NPR suggests that the role of nuclear weapons in US security policy will not decrease, as in Obama's NPR, but rather increase.

Second, Obama's NPR stated that, although investing a lot of money in so-called 'life extension programs', the US '*will not develop new nuclear warheads. Life Extension Programs will use only nuclear components based on previously tested designs, and will not support new military missions or provide for new military capabilities*'.<sup>7</sup> Trump's NPR, in contrast, plans for new types of warheads: low-yield warheads to be used by existing Sea-Launched Ballistic Missiles (SLBM) and/or a – newly to be developed – Sea-Launched Cruise Missile (SLCM). The reasoning behind this plan is that adversaries currently may not be fully deterred by the approximately 6,800 US nuclear weapons, because the use of most

of these weapons would entail massive destruction. Lower-yield weapons, causing less (collateral) damage, '*will help counter any mistaken perception of an exploitable "gap" in US regional deterrence capabilities*', the NPR assumes.<sup>8</sup> Although contrasting with Obama's 2010 version, the 2002 NPR of George W. Bush mentioned the same intention, but this policy aim was not realised.<sup>9</sup> The US already has some lower-yield nuclear weapons in its arsenal; the B-61 gravity bombs (also stationed in Europe) can be adjusted to produce different yields. The intention to develop more types of low-yield weapons, particularly missile warheads next to the existing gravity bombs, is often characterised by analysts as lowering the threshold for actual nuclear weapon use as well as increasing the risk of unintentional nuclear war, since especially missiles with low-yield nuclear weapons may blur the distinction between nuclear and conventional weapons for adversaries.<sup>10</sup> The NPR refutes this criticism beforehand by stating: '*In no way does this approach lower the nuclear threshold. Rather, by convincing adversaries that even limited use of nuclear weapons will be more costly than they can tolerate, it in fact raises that threshold*'.<sup>11</sup> In other words: the Trump Administration believes deterrence is strengthened by adding low-yield nuclear weapons to the arsenal – a *quid pro quo* approach based on the adversary's potential which needs to be mirrored by the US. This also suggests that the current US Administration believes that nuclear war can be controlled: a US response with low-yield weapons to Russian use of tactical nuclear weapons could prevent immediate escalation to the release of the strategic

2 2010 Nuclear Posture Review, p. 17.

3 2018 Nuclear Posture Review, p. 21.

4 On 11 January 2018 the Huffington Post published a leaked draft version of the NPR.

5 David E. Sanger and William J. Broad, 'Pentagon Suggests Countering Devastating Cyberattacks With Nuclear Arms', *New York Times*, 16 January 2018.

6 2018 Nuclear Posture Review, p. 67-68.

7 2010 Nuclear Posture Review, p. 39.

8 2018 Nuclear Posture Review, p. 55.

9 Nuclear Posture Review [Excerpts], Submitted to Congress on 31 December 2001, p. 14, via: <https://web.stanford.edu/class/polisci211z/2.6/NPR2001leaked.pdf>.

10 John Haltiwanger, 'U.S. Military Plans New Nuclear Weapons, Making War with Russia and China More Likely, Experts Say', *Newsweek*, 16 January 2018; Sico van der Meer and Christine Parthemore, 'Revive Arms Control and Start with Nuclear-Armed Cruise Missiles', *War on the Rocks*, 8 June 2016.

11 2018 Nuclear Posture Review, p. II.

arsenal. Naturally, many critics actually doubt whether nuclear war can be controlled once both sides have started to use (tactical or low-yield) nuclear weapons.

The rationale behind the changes is the (assumed) worsening of the international security situation of the US. Russia and China in particular are mentioned as nuclear weapons states which pose an increasing threat to the US – the NPR captures this as ‘*The Return of Great Power Competition*’.<sup>12</sup> This world view is in line with Trump’s National Security Strategy, published in December 2017, and the National Defense Strategy of January 2018. The NPR in particular accuses Russia of rapidly developing new nuclear delivery capabilities – thus violating the Intermediate-Range Nuclear Forces (INF) Treaty of 1987 – and lowering the threshold for nuclear weapons use as well. Indeed, there are strong indications that the most recent (secret) Russian nuclear doctrine drastically lowered the circumstances in which nuclear weapons could be used.<sup>13</sup> In addition to Russia and China, the NPR also mentions North Korea, Iran and non-state actors such as extremist groups as adversaries that have or may soon have the ability to hit US targets with nuclear weapons and should thus be deterred.

It should be noted that the NPR consists of plans that will not necessarily be executed completely. In particular the US Congress and Senate have a say in the costs; if the required budgets are not approved, it will be difficult for President Trump to realise the aims of developing new types of nuclear weapons. The nuclear arsenal modernisation alone, even without the development of new types of warheads and missiles, is already estimated to cost 1,200 billion US Dollar over the next 30 years. Some Members of Congress may prefer other ways to spend such amounts of tax money. Yet, broadening the circumstances in which nuclear weapons may be used does not require any budget.

## Impact on NATO and Europe

After the end of the Cold War the role of nuclear weapons in NATO’s strategy disappeared into the background – just as the Alliance’s core task of territorial defence lost its prominence. For two decades the military were busy with crisis management operations, from the Balkans to Afghanistan. At NATO Headquarters in Brussels the important job of ‘Director of Nuclear Affairs’ – traditionally filled by high-potential American officials – was changed into ‘Director of Operations’ during NATO’s growing involvement in Bosnia. The nuclear directorate became a small unit, acting as the custodian of a dormant issue. Ministerial and Summit communiqués repeated time after time the standard phrase: ‘NATO will remain a nuclear Alliance as long as nuclear weapons exist’. But that was all.

Since 2014 – the year of Crimea’s annexation by Russia and the beginning of its interference in the war in Eastern Ukraine – NATO’s original task of territorial defence (article 5) has been back at the top of the priorities list. As a result, the Alliance’s ‘deterrence and defence posture’ is again a key topic, receiving the highest attention from NATO’s political and military leaders. So far, the nuclear element has not been part of the debate. All focus and attention has been on reinforcing conventional forces, in particular in view of the vulnerability of NATO’s eastern borders. This politically comfortable situation – ‘we don’t need to talk about nuclear weapons’ – is about to end with the release of President Trump’s NPR. Any change in the nuclear strategy of the United States in the past ultimately had an impact on NATO’s strategy – such as the replacement of ‘massive retaliation’ in the 1950s by ‘flexible response’ in the 1960s. As a result a broad set of tactical nuclear weapons were introduced at the time. By the end of the Cold War many of these tactical or non-strategic nuclear weapons had been disbanded and replaced by conventional means. About 90% of American tactical nuclear weapons were scrapped. The only remaining non-strategic NATO nuclear weapon today is the B-61 gravity bomb to be dropped by Dual Capable Aircraft (DCA). Although formally never acknowledged,

12 2018 Nuclear Posture Review, p. 6.

13 Mark B. Schneider, ‘Escalate to de-escalate’, *Proceedings Magazine*, February 2017.

it is a well-known fact that B-61 nuclear bombs are stored in Belgium (Kleine Brogel Air Base), Germany (Büchel), Italy (Aviano and Ghedi), the Netherlands (Volkel) and Turkey (Incirlik) – a total of up to 200 nuclear weapons.<sup>14</sup>

The NATO Strategic Concept of 2010 underlines that the fundamental purpose of Alliance nuclear forces is deterrence. The existing NATO Deterrence and Defence Posture – endorsed by Allied Heads of State and Government in 2012 – states that “*the Alliance’s nuclear force posture currently meets the criteria for an effective deterrence and defence posture*”. Furthermore, the 2010 Strategic Concept spells out that “*we will ensure the broadest possible participation of Allies in collective defence planning on nuclear roles, in peacetime basing of nuclear forces, and in command, control and consultation arrangements*”. Allies also agreed in 2010 on “*seeking to create the conditions and considering options for further reductions of non-strategic nuclear weapons assigned to NATO*”. The new American nuclear posture may call into question all these pre-Trump NATO positions.

Firstly, the new NPR seems to consider the non-strategic component as the weakest element in the US nuclear posture in view of the continued existence and modernisation of the Russian short- and medium-range nuclear weapons. The perceived threat of Russian ‘limited’ use of tactical nuclear weapons to ensure victory after a conventional attack, for example to capture the Baltic States, has also been stressed in recent years. The development of low-yield SLBMs and SLCMs is meant to fill this ‘nuclear gap’. As they are sea-based, European countries risk being out of the loop when it comes to formulating their role unless they become part of NATO’s nuclear force posture. One could think of nuclear SLCMs on board the US Sixth Fleet in the Mediterranean. Mentioning the option of developing a ground-based nuclear

capability for the intermediate range is an option with far-reaching consequences. It would imply the end of the INF Treaty and the potential return to Europe of the class of land-based nuclear weapons with a 500 to 5,500 km range. The US might also opt for a new Air-Launched Cruise Missile (ALCM) with the same intermediate range, but stationing such nuclear weapons in Europe would practically imply the same. If Trump were to call on European Allies to share the nuclear burden by planning the deployment of nuclear ALCMs by their Dual Capable Aircraft, it would also generate a huge political debate in the Alliance. Moreover, one can expect a 21<sup>st</sup> century variant of the upheaval in Western European societies comparable to the mass demonstrations and other protest actions of the 1980s in response to the stationing of the nuclear Pershing II missiles and the Ground-Launched Cruise Missiles. No doubt Moscow would explore and use all modern tools – propaganda via the internet, social media, cyber trolls, etc. – to influence public opinion in Western European countries.

Secondly, transatlantic security and defence relations may be negatively affected if Washington perceives a lack of will on the part of European NATO allies to support the US in implementing the NPR. Trump considers burden-sharing a key issue for measuring NATO solidarity. Again, so far, the NATO target of spending 2% of GDP on defence and thus increasing the European share of NATO’s conventional force posture has been the primary tool of measurement. From now on, European allies operating Dual Capable Aircraft and hosting nuclear weapons on their national territory might also be held accountable by the US for the nuclear burden-sharing. As the US will extend the life of the B-61 bomb and is preparing the F-35 Joint Strike Fighter as the delivery aircraft, Washington will soon call on European partners to join in this effort. The two types of aircraft with a DCA role are the F-16, flown by the air forces of Belgium, Italy, the Netherlands and Turkey, and the Tornado (Germany). Italy and the Netherlands have already decided to replace their F-16 fleet with the F-35 in the coming years. Belgium will decide later this year, while Germany is preparing its decision on the replacement of

---

14 Robert S. Norris & Hans M. Kristensen, ‘US tactical nuclear weapons in Europe’, *Bulletin of the Atomic Scientists*, No. 67-1, 2011, pp. 64-73.

the Tornado. As Italy and the Netherlands are ahead with the replacement of the F-16, it is likely that they will be the first two countries that have to decide whether to continue the DCA role once their F-35s become operational. In the Netherlands, this issue was deferred when the decision was taken to procure the F-35 (in 2013). The current Rutte-3 government is a coalition of four political parties. One of them – the left-liberal D66 – has stated in its political programme that it opposes the nuclear role of the F-35. Thus, the Rutte-3 coalition will run into serious political problems if the US beats the drum on nuclear burden-sharing when the Netherlands starts to operate the F-35 – as of 2019.

Thirdly, a political debate on the role of nuclear weapons might raise questions on the future role of the French and British nuclear forces. So far, these have been considered as independent, having a deterrent role of their own but contributing to the overall deterrence and security of the allies. A transatlantic rift with regard to NATO's nuclear role could lead to consideration being given to 'Europeanising' the nuclear arsenals of the two countries either side of the Channel. Taking into account Brexit and London's dependency on the US for maintaining and modernising the Trident SLBMs, such a Europeanisation is less likely in the British case. Although France will not give up its own independent nuclear posture, autonomous European defence – a stated goal of French security and defence policy – is currently unthinkable without a nuclear component. The combination of fundamental disagreement about NATO's future nuclear deterrence posture and the creation of Europe's own defence capabilities could open the door to the creation of a European Nuclear Force. As France is the only continental European country with an independent nuclear arsenal, which in general can be maintained and modernised without any outside involvement, Paris will hold the key to any form of Europeanising its nuclear forces (or part of it). Even if the scenario of a fundamental rift in the Alliance with regard to the role of nuclear weapons is avoided, extending the French nuclear umbrella to the rest of Europe might still be considered a desirable option

to strengthen NATO's deterrence posture by raising the threshold of uncertainty for any adversary that might think of attacking Europe.

## Implications for arms control

In line with President Trump's previous statements in which he expressed negative views of nuclear arms control agreements like New START with Russia and the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA) with Iran, this NPR does not show much – if any – ambition with regard to international arms control efforts. Although the document states that the US remains willing to engage in arms control negotiations, its inclination seems to be to increase the role of nuclear weapons, not decrease it. The focus in the arms control paragraph is on non-proliferation – preventing new actors obtaining nuclear weapons – and not on reductions in arsenals of existing nuclear weapons states.

A surprising detail is that this NPR adds a new requirement for any future arms control agreements: they should be '*verifiable and enforceable*'.<sup>15</sup> The notion that agreements without any verification are undesirable is hardly disputable, although unilateral steps such as the Presidential Nuclear Initiatives of George H.W. Bush in 1991 (reducing the US non-strategic nuclear weapons arsenal) are generally not verified. The requirement of being 'enforceable', however, is unprecedented in nuclear arms control.<sup>16</sup> First of all, it is not clear what it means in practice. It seems that any party signing an enforceable agreement agrees that if it does not meet the requirements, it will be confronted with 'enforcement'. But what does that mean? Diplomatic measures, economic sanctions, or even military action against this party? What if this were applied in, for example, the Chemical Weapons Convention, under which the US has for

15 2018 Nuclear Posture Review, p. 73.

16 Michael Krepon, 'The most dangerous word in the draft Nuclear Posture Review', *Defense One*, 23 January 2018.

many years been missing its disarmament deadlines due to technological and budgetary reasons? Would 'enforceable' in such an example mean that other parties to the convention could use force against the US because of these missed deadlines? It is hard to envisage any state signing an arms control agreement which meets this new US requirement.

While the NPR to some extent reads like a Cold War era document – mirroring arms developments from adversaries resulting in a continuing arms race – an important lesson from this same era is that nuclear deterrence can best be accompanied by a set of arms control agreements and crisis-control measures to prevent unintended nuclear war. However, Trump's NPR does not reflect any ambition in this regard.

## Conclusions

1. At first sight, President Trump's NPR may seem quite similar to the versions of his predecessors Barack Obama and George W. Bush. Nevertheless, a few important changes with potentially far-reaching consequences can also be seen. The NPR broadens the circumstances in which the US may use nuclear weapons, while at the same time aiming for the introduction of new types of 'smaller', low-yield nuclear weapons. Both intentions may contribute to lowering the threshold for nuclear weapons use and blur the difference between nuclear and conventional weapons. This in turn may endanger the global norm against nuclear weapons use and increase the risks of nuclear warfare because of misunderstandings and miscalculation.
2. Any NPR has direct effects on the European member states of NATO – a nuclear alliance relying significantly on US nuclear weapons. The new directions of the US nuclear weapons policy outlined in this NPR require an informed debate among policy makers as well as the general public in European member states on the extent to which NATO should follow the same direction as the US in this regard or not. Such a debate should take place before the Alliance takes decisions on potentially changing the NATO nuclear posture and not once decisions have already been taken. Specific European interests also call for a discussion at European level, in which the role of the British and French independent nuclear arsenals have to be taken into account.
3. The NPR might also lead to more American political pressure on European allies operating Dual Capable Aircraft (Belgium, Germany, Italy, Netherlands, Turkey). Countries that are the first in line to replace the F-16 with the F-35 – Italy and the Netherlands – will soon have to decide whether to continue their nuclear role. In the Netherlands this is very likely to cause a political problem, as one of the Rutte-3 government coalition parties – D66 – opposes continuation of the Dutch nuclear role.
4. Moreover, with the risk of a renewed nuclear arms race on the horizon, European allies should emphasise the need for serious arms control and risk reduction efforts between the US and other nuclear weapons states to prevent a dangerous spiral of continuously increasing nuclear escalation risks.

### About the Clingendael Institute

Clingendael – the Netherlands Institute of International Relations – is a leading think tank and academy on international affairs. Through our analyses, training and public debate we aim to inspire and equip governments, businesses, and civil society in order to contribute to a secure, sustainable and just world.

[www.clingendael.org](http://www.clingendael.org)  
[info@clingendael.org](mailto:info@clingendael.org)  
+31 70 324 53 84

 @clingendaelorg  
 The Clingendael Institute  
 The Clingendael Institute

### About the authors

**Dick Zandee** is Senior Research Fellow at the Clingendael Institute. His research focuses on security and defence issues, including policies, defence capability development, research and technology, armaments cooperation and defence industrial aspects.

**Sico van der Meer** is a Research Fellow at the Clingendael Institute. His research focuses on non-conventional weapons like Weapons of Mass Destruction and cyber weapons from a strategic policy perspective.