

THE ROLE OF NUCLEAR WEAPONS IN U.S. STRATEGY

The 2022 Nuclear Posture Review (NPR) takes a comprehensive and balanced approach, striking the proper balance between: 1) maintaining a safe, secure, and effective nuclear deterrent and strong and credible extended deterrence; and 2) taking those steps needed to reduce the risk of nuclear war and the salience of nuclear weapons globally. Nested within the Department of Defense’s National Defense Strategy, the NPR recognizes that nuclear weapons undergird all our national defense priorities and that no element of U.S. military power can replace the unique deterrence effects that nuclear weapons provide. Although the fundamental role of U.S. nuclear weapons is to deter nuclear attack, more broadly they deter all forms of strategic attack, assure Allies and partners, and allow us to achieve Presidential objectives if deterrence fails.

NUCLEAR DECLARATORY POLICY

The 2022 NPR announces the following declaratory policy.

United States Declaratory Policy

As long as nuclear weapons exist, the fundamental role of U.S. nuclear weapons is to deter nuclear attack on the United States, our allies, and partners. The U.S. would only consider the use of nuclear weapons in extreme circumstances to defend the vital interests of the United States or its allies and partners.

The United States continues to rely on nuclear weapons to deter all forms of strategic attack – including nuclear employment of any scale – and high consequence attacks of a strategic nature using non-nuclear means. While retaining a very high bar for U.S. nuclear employment, this approach complicates adversary decision making and reflects a sensible and stabilizing approach to deterring a range of attacks in a dynamic security environment. The United States continues to adhere to a negative security assurance that it will not use or threaten to use nuclear weapons against non-nuclear weapons states party to the Treaty on the Nonproliferation of Nuclear Weapons that are in compliance with their nuclear non-proliferation obligations.

TAILORED NUCLEAR DETERRENCE

Any adversary use of nuclear weapons would fundamentally alter the nature of a conflict. We must therefore be able to deter both large-scale and limited nuclear attacks from a range of adversaries. The capability to deter limited nuclear attacks is critical given that some competitors have developed strategies for warfare that may rely on the threat or actual employment of nuclear weapons in order to terminate a conflict on advantageous terms. Some Allies and partners are particularly vulnerable to attacks with non-nuclear means that could produce devastating effects. Given that the U.S. global alliance network is a military center of gravity, the United States will continue to field flexible nuclear capabilities and maintain country-specific approaches that reflect our best understanding of adversary decision-making and perceptions.

