US Nuclear Weapons Capabilities and Purpose

Jon Wolfsthal
To IFRI
October 12, 2017
US Nuclear Policy

- Only person who can order use of US nuclear weapons in the President of the United States.
- US forces are to deter attack on the United States or its Treaty allies in Europe and East Asia.
- Current US policy is not to use or threaten to use nuclear weapons against non-nuclear states.
## US Nuclear Forces

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Land-based Missiles</th>
<th>Submarine-launched Missiles</th>
<th>Strategic Bombers</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>400 missiles</td>
<td>14 boats, 248 missiles</td>
<td>60 bombers</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>400 warheads</td>
<td>1984 warheads</td>
<td>Undefined</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

- ICBMs can be launched with almost no notice, one submarine in Atlantic and Pacific at all times.
- New START agreement caps each side to 1550 weapons accountable.
- Tactical weapons not included, US has some – Russia has more.
- Total forces, including spares and extras just over 4,000.
Broad mission is to deter use of nuclear weapons attack on us and our allies.

2010 statement “United States 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.”

Long-standing goal to reduce role and number of nuclear weapons to a minimum.

Obama considered “Sole purpose” and came close.

Great difference from public and official views on nuclear weapons between US and France.
Three missions and target sets

- Deter (hold precious targets at risk).
- Reassure (ensure our allies don’t need nuclear weapons, can rely on us). This is the main driver in numbers.
- Damage Limitation – if deterrence fails, be able to reduce the damage an attacked can inflict on US or its allies.
Future Policy Debates

- Trump Administration review underway.
- Less interested in connection between nuclear weapons and nonproliferation or disarmament.
- Likely to propose development of new weapons and capabilities.
- Will prioritize investments in nuclear systems, replacements of current forces – over $1 Trillion over next 30 years.
- Unknowns – commitment to zero, commitments not to target non-nuclear states, etc.
Future of Debate

* Money will be a big factor, we cannot afford it all.
* Public has little interest, knowledge to assess costs, benefits, strategy – an elite issue.
* Democrats/Resistance focused on Trump judgment and stability – will be the lens through which they view nuclear weapons under Trump.