

Connecticut Debate Association

March 7, 2020

Darien High School and Greenwich High School

Resolved: The US should adopt a “no first use” policy for nuclear weapons.

Democratic candidates are debating a nuclear ‘No First Use’ policy.

The Washington Post, By Brian Radzinsky, August 2, 2019

Tuesday’s debate among Democratic presidential candidates focused largely on domestic policy. But national security briefly entered the fray when moderators asked Sen. Elizabeth Warren (Mass.) about her support for a nuclear weapons “No First Use” (NFU) policy. Warren later tweeted that “threatening to use nuclear weapons first makes America less safe.”

Democratic support for NFU is growing. As she noted in her tweet, Warren has introduced a bill making NFU U.S. policy. Rep. Adam Smith (D-Wash.), chairman of the Armed Services Committee, has introduced Warren’s legislation in the House. Nearly 40 House and Senate Democrats — and no Republicans — have signed on.

How does NFU differ from current U.S. policy, and what are the purported benefits? Here are five things to know:

1. What does NFU mean?

NFU would change nuclear “declaratory policy” — what the United States says publicly about its nuclear strategy. Under an NFU policy, the United States would declare that it would not use nuclear weapons unless it or its allies were attacked with nuclear weapons. Such a declaration could appear in a future Nuclear Posture Review — the Pentagon-led nuclear policy review typically undertaken by new administrations.

2. What is current policy?

The United States does not have a nuclear first-strike policy.

Rather, the United States maintains a number of nuclear war plans tailored to a variety of adversaries and contingencies. The rationale behind multiple options is to give presidents maximum flexibility so that they have the option of either striking first or absorbing a strike and retaliating.

Analysts believe — the details are secret — that U.S. war plans involve some first-strike options. But declassified Reagan-era documents reveal that U.S. war plans were premised on the assumption that U.S. nuclear use would take place after a Soviet attack began. Current war plans probably also assume that U.S. nuclear first use is the exception rather than the rule.

The most vexing challenge for NFU is whether to retain the ability to preemptively destroy an adversary’s nuclear forces if an attack appears imminent. These “damage limitation” attacks have been an enduring feature of U.S. nuclear war plans. NFU proponents are not clear on whether the policy applies to preemptive strikes when attacks appear imminent.

Warren’s NFU proposal would not change the president’s sole authority to use nuclear weapons. And there would be no effect on U.S. nuclear capabilities, including an active stockpile of about 2,200 nuclear weapons. Of these, 850 warheads on 500 missiles are ready to fire at a moment’s notice — the rest can be loaded onto aircraft relatively quickly. Only a handful of NFU proponents have called for corresponding changes to U.S. nuclear capabilities.

3. What is NFU supposed to accomplish?

Current policy states that the United States would consider nuclear use only in “extreme circumstances.” The definition of “extreme” is intentionally ambiguous and could entail first or second use. The 2018 Nuclear Posture Review states that “extreme” could include (but isn’t limited to) attacks on U.S. or allied civilian populations or infrastructure, or attacks on U.S. or allied nuclear forces and infrastructure.

No, the U.S. didn’t just threaten a preventive nuclear strike.

Proponents of NFU argue that this ambiguity is dangerous. Because the current formulation keeps U.S. nuclear “red lines” fuzzy, adversaries in a future war could not be sure which military or nonmilitary actions might trigger U.S. nuclear use. They might, therefore, opt to jump the gun and launch their own first strike. Consequently, NFU could reduce the risk of miscalculation.

Critics argue that the ambiguity is a feature rather than a bug: If adversaries do not know what might trigger a first strike, they might be deterred from fighting in the first place.

4. Has NFU been tried before?

India, China and the Soviet Union have issued NFU pledges. India’s policy includes a caveat that a biological or chemical attack could warrant nuclear retaliation. China’s NFU policy is unqualified, although analysts suggest that exceptions exist.

The Soviet Union issued a no-first-use pledge in 1982, but Russia rescinded it after the U.S.S.R. collapsed. President Barack Obama considered NFU in his second term but reportedly demurred.

5. How might U.S. adversaries and allies react to NFU?

Critics argue that NFU would undermine the United States' ability to defend its allies. Allies could also see NFU as a sign of weakening U.S. commitment and, consequently, pursue their own nuclear weapons. Allies might also demand more military aid or even resort to appeasing adversaries. Proponents argue that U.S. conventional military superiority is sufficient to defend U.S. allies and territory.

With respect to U.S. allies, the case for NFU rests on two assumptions: that the United States can remain militarily dominant and that the threat of first use makes no contribution to allied security. If U.S. superiority is in question, or if nuclear weapons make even a marginal contribution to deterrence, NFU might be risky.

Another possibility is that NFU neither helps nor hurts. Here's an example: The United States found the Soviet Union's NFU pledge somewhat credible, but Reagan administration officials dismissed it as "entirely self-serving." The U.S.S.R. had a huge conventional military advantage in Europe, which made it less likely to use nuclear weapons compared with the relative weaker NATO (although the officials stressed that the United States would never initiate conflict in Europe).

For different reasons, Cold War intelligence estimates also found China's NFU pledge credible. China had a small and unsophisticated nuclear arsenal — so U.S. intelligence analysts concluded that NFU was "probably a realistic statement of intent." In both cases, NFU pledges were seen as credible but not very significant. The Soviets had no need for first use, while the Chinese lacked the ability to engage in first use.

Even if the U.S. government adopts NFU, either through presidential order or legislation, there are still a host of nuclear challenges, including an ongoing U.S. modernization program and an accelerating arms race in conventional missiles.

The next president will also face the broader challenge of how to sustain U.S. military strength into the future. All of these choices will affect the expected costs and benefits of an NFU policy.

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Should America rule out first use of nuclear weapons?

The Economist, Aug 15th 2019, Elizabeth Warren thinks so. America's allies do not

President Barack Obama promised that he would reduce the role that nuclear weapons played in America's national security strategy. His successor has done the opposite. In a review of nuclear policy published in February 2018, Donald Trump seemed to expand the circumstances in which America might use nuclear weapons first, to include cyber-attacks on the networks that transmit presidential orders to silos, submarines and bombers. He also ordered the manufacture of new low-yield warheads (these are equivalent to about half a Hiroshima), which critics fear are more likely to be used. And he has issued hair-raising threats against North Korea, alarming those who worry about his impulsiveness. All this is fuelling a debate about nuclear risks.

Elizabeth Warren, a Democratic presidential contender, wants to start with American nuclear doctrine. Every president since Harry Truman has reserved the right to use nuclear weapons in a conflict even if an enemy has not unleashed them first. In January Ms Warren introduced a Senate bill that would mandate a policy of what wonks call No First Use (NFU). Such pledges are common: China and India committed themselves to versions of NFU decades ago, as did the Soviet Union. But in America it would reverse over seven decades of nuclear thinking.

Proponents of NFU argue that launching nuclear weapons first in a conflict is neither necessary nor wise. It is not necessary because America's regular armed forces are strong enough to defeat enemies without recourse to weapons of mass destruction. It is not wise because an adversary that fears an American bolt from the blue is more likely to put its own arsenal on hair-trigger alert, increasing the risk of unauthorised or accidental launch. An adversary might also be tempted to pre-empt America by going even faster, a dangerous dynamic that Thomas Schelling, an economist and nuclear theorist, called the "reciprocal fear of surprise attack".

That is all well and good, say critics of NFU. But America is in a different position from China and India. It not only defends itself, but also extends a protective nuclear umbrella over allies around the world. If North Korea were to invade South Korea with its ample army, it must reckon with the possibility of a nuclear response from America. The South Korean government would like to keep it that way.

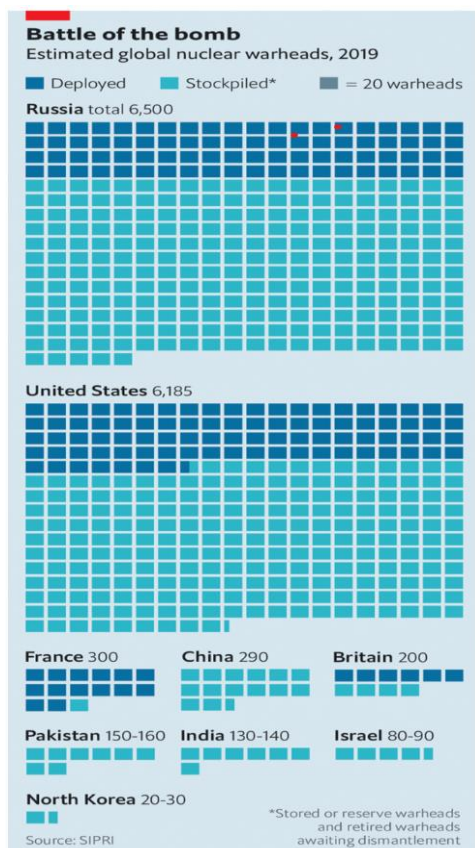
Estonia and Taiwan would like Russia and China, respectively, to face similar uncertainty. Thus when Mr Obama toyed with the idea of pledging NFU during his administration, Britain, Japan, France and South Korea—all American allies facing more populous foes—lobbied successfully against such a move.

NFU-sceptics also point to the increasing potency of non-nuclear weapons. Like America, China and Russia are both developing hypersonic missiles capable of crossing oceans at over five times the speed of sound. Some might destroy

targets with nothing more than their kinetic energy—no need for nuclear tips. Chemical and biological weapons could also wreak havoc without splitting atoms.

That would put an NFU-bound America in an invidious position. If such non-nuclear missiles were falling on Washington, should a nuclear response be off the table? And even if it was declared to be so, would adversaries believe it? After all, Pakistan is scornful of India's own NFU pledge, just as America is sceptical of China's. Talk is cheap, trust is in short supply and the stakes could not be higher.

Whereas Ms Warren's proposal would outlaw first use under any circumstances, others merely wish to place checks on this untrammelled presidential launch authority. America's nuclear chain of command was designed to concentrate decision-making in the White House and to keep it away from generals. James Mattis, Mr Trump's defence secretary until last year, reassured outsiders that he would serve as a check, telling Strategic Command "not to put on a pot of coffee without letting him know", according to the Washington Post. But he had no foolproof means to guarantee he could do this.



"The weight of the open evidence" suggests that "the Secretary of Defence is not just unnecessary, but not even in the nuclear chain of command," says Alex Wellerstein, an expert on nuclear history at the Stevens Institute of Technology. William Perry, a former defence secretary, agrees. The president is free to instruct the chairman of the joint chiefs of staff, the top military officer, as he wishes. "We built a system that depends on having a rational actor in the White House," says Alexandra Bell, a former State Department official now at the Centre for Arms Control and Non-Proliferation. "We now know the system is flawed."

America first

In January Congressman Ted Lieu and Senator Ed Markey, both Democrats, reintroduced a bill, originally proposed in 2016, that would force the president to seek a congressional declaration of war (last done in 1942) with express approval for nuclear first use. Nancy Pelosi, the Democratic leader of the House of Representatives, endorsed the idea in 2017.

There are also wider efforts to prune the arsenal. Adam Smith, the chairman of the House Armed Services Committee and co-sponsor of Ms Warren's NFU bill, has sought to cut funding for Mr Trump's mini-nuke and to limit its deployment on submarines. To the Pentagon's horror, he has also suggested scrapping America's silo-based missiles, leaving the job to submarines and bombers.

Politicians should not expect clear guidance from voters. A survey in 2010 found that 57% agreed with Ms Warren that "the us should only use nuclear weapons in response to a nuclear attack by another nation." Yet it turns out that Americans also quite like fire and fury. A paper by Scott Sagan of Stanford University and Benjamin Valentino of Dartmouth College, published in 2017, found that a clear majority approved of using nuclear

weapons first if doing so would save the lives of 20,000 American soldiers—even if it killed 2m Iranian civilians. "The conventional wisdom around nuclear weapons remains strongly embedded," says Jon Wolfsthal, director of the Nuclear Crisis Group and a former official in Mr Obama's administration. "I am not sure there will be changes, but big changes are being discussed more openly now than in a long time." ■

No First Use: Myths vs. Realities

The Center for Arms Control and Non-Proliferation

<https://armscontrolcenter.org/issues/no-first-use/no-first-use-myths-vs-realities/>

No First Use policy is just common sense, and former military officials including former Secretary of Defense William Perry and former Commander of U.S. Strategic Command James Cartwright agree. But we know there are a lot of questions about how it would work. We recommend first learning more about No First Use from our main No First Use page and then reading through answers to some frequently asked questions before diving into the myths and realities. Below, you'll find some helpful information for refuting common objections to No First Use.

Myth: Adopting a No First Use policy will undermine extended deterrence to U.S. allies and create a less stable security environment.

Reality: Adopting a No First Use policy will not reduce the United States' commitment to extended deterrence. Extended

deterrence is about much more than just nuclear weapons. Forward deployments of U.S. conventional forces paired with strong and unwavering political commitments play the most immediate roles in deterring aggression against the United States and its allies. The United States maintains thousands of troops and hundreds of ships in commands around the world to balance crisis zones and deter aggression. The United States employs advanced conventional capabilities including intelligence, surveillance, and reconnaissance tools and precision-guided weapons in conflicts, but also to help deter potential attacks. The United States' robust conventional forces are more than sufficient to deter or counter non-nuclear attacks on U.S. allies, and conventional military threats are more credible than threats to use nuclear weapons first. Current and former military officials have emphasized the crucial role that U.S. conventional forces play in projecting power globally and credibly deterring aggression.

The credible U.S. second-strike capability is and will remain a deterrent to nuclear attack, but the threat of nuclear preemption is unnecessary and dangerous. If nuclear-armed adversaries believe that the United States would use nuclear weapons first, they will be incentivized to use their nuclear weapons before a devastating U.S. strike degrades the capability. This dynamic is destabilizing and increases the chance of a nuclear miscalculation.

Maintaining extended deterrence guarantees requires consistent communication and coordination. Any change to U.S. declaratory policy should be made after consultation with allies about why this change is in our collective security interest.

Myth: Allies will acquire their own nuclear weapons if they lose faith in the credibility of U.S. extended deterrence.

Reality: The financial, political, and security consequences of acquiring nuclear weapons are strong deterrents against nuclear proliferation among U.S. allies, as are their own legal obligations. U.S. allies understand that developing nuclear weapons in contravention of their Non-Proliferation Treaty obligations would severely disrupt alliance relationships and would certainly have a greater negative impact than a shift in U.S. declaratory policy. U.S. allies have no need to pursue nuclear weapons, as there is no reason to question the credibility of U.S. extended deterrence. An NFU policy will have no effect on the ability of the United States to deter threats to its allies' security with its robust conventional forces and the threat of nuclear retaliation in response to a nuclear attack.

Myth: A U.S. NFU policy will not change policy in other nuclear weapon states.

Reality: The goal of an NFU policy is not to influence other nuclear weapons states. The goal of an NFU policy is to make it clear when and how the United States would consider using nuclear weapons. This clarity will help reduce the risk of miscalculation or inadvertent escalation in a crisis with a nuclear-armed adversary.

Adopting an NFU policy would be welcomed by non-nuclear weapon states, including U.S. allies, that are increasingly frustrated that nuclear weapon states have not made significant progress on their disarmament obligations as outlined in the Non-Proliferation Treaty (NPT).

Myth: U.S. allies and adversaries will not believe a U.S. NFU policy.

Reality: Like any political commitment, the credibility of an NFU policy will rely on the actions the United States takes to back it up. In the long term, the United States can take steps to shift to a "deterrence-only" nuclear force posture. For example, de-alerting the land-based leg of the triad would work in conjunction with an NFU policy to improve stability in a crisis. Eventually, Washington could reevaluate the necessity of the ICBM force altogether. In the near-term, even if allies and adversaries are skeptical of a U.S. NFU policy at first, the commitment will create an incentive and opportunity for an adversary to communicate directly with the United States to confirm its intentions and reduce the risk of miscalculation in a crisis.

Finger on the button

The Economist, Leaders, Aug 15th 2019

America should not rule out using nuclear weapons first, a nuclear shift would alarm allies.

In 1973 Major Harold Hering, a veteran pilot and trainee missile-squadron commander, asked his superiors a question: if told to fire his nuclear-tipped rockets, how would he know that the orders were lawful, legitimate and from a sane president? Soon after, Major Hering was pulled from duty and later kicked out of the air force for his "mental and moral reservations".

His question hit a nerve because there was, and remains, no check on a president's authority to launch nuclear weapons. That includes launching them first, before America has been nuked itself. The United States has refused to rule out dropping a nuclear bomb on an enemy that has used only conventional weapons, since it first did so in 1945.

Many people think this calculated ambiguity is a bad idea. It is unnecessary, because America is strong enough to repel conventional attacks with conventional arms. And it increases the risk of accidents and misunderstandings. If, when the tide of a conventional war turns, Russia or China fears that America may unexpectedly use nukes, they will put their own arsenals on high alert, to preserve them. If America calculates that its rivals could thus be tempted to strike early, it may feel under pressure to go first—and so on, nudging the world towards the brink.

Elizabeth Warren, a Democratic contender for the presidency, is one of many who want to remedy this by committing America, by law, to a policy of No First Use (NFU) (see article). India and China have already declared NFU, or something close, despite having smaller, more vulnerable arsenals.

Ms Warren's impulse to constrain nuclear policy is right. However, her proposal could well have perverse effects that make the world less stable. Many of America's allies, such as South Korea and the Baltic states, face large and intimidating rivals at a time when they worry about the global balance of power. They think uncertainty about America's first use helps deter conventional attacks that might threaten their very existence, such as a Russian assault on Estonia or a Chinese invasion of Taiwan. Were America to rule out first use, some of its Asian allies might pursue nuclear weapons of their own. Any such proliferation risks being destabilising and dangerous, multiplying the risks of nuclear war.

The aim should be to maximise the deterrence from nuclear weapons while minimising the risk that they themselves become the cause of an escalation. The place to start is the question posed by Major Hering 46 years ago. No individual ought to be entrusted with the unchecked power to initiate annihilation, even if he or she has been elected to the White House. One way to check the president's launch authority would be to allow first use, but only with collective agreement, from congressional leaders, say, or the cabinet.

There are other ways for a first-use policy to be safer. America should make clear that the survival of nations must be at stake. Alas, the Trump administration has moved in the opposite direction, warning that "significant non-nuclear strategic attack", including cyber-strikes, might meet with a nuclear response. America can also make its systems safer. About a third of American and Russian nuclear forces are designed to be launched within a few minutes, without the possibility of recall, merely on warning of enemy attack. Yet in recent decades, missile launches have been ambiguous enough to trigger the most serious alarms. If both sides agreed to take their weapons off this hair-trigger, their leaders could make decisions with cooler heads.

Most of all, America can put more effort into arms control. The collapse of the Intermediate-range Nuclear Forces Treaty on August 2nd and a deadly radioactive accident in Russia involving a nuclear-powered missile on August 8th (see article) were the latest reminders that nuclear risks are growing just as the world's ability to manage them seems to be diminishing.

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The Case for a U.S. No-First-Use Policy

Arms Control Today, Oct. 2018, Arms Control Assoc., By Daryl G. Kimball, Executive Director

Stanley Kubrick's classic 1964 film "Dr. Strangelove" delivers an eerily accurate depiction of the absurd logic and catastrophic risks of U.S. and Russian Cold War nuclear deterrence strategy, but for one key detail: President Merkin Muffley was wrong when he said, "It is the avowed policy of our country never to strike first with nuclear weapons." But it should be.

Fortunately, the nuclear "doomsday machine" has not yet been unleashed. Arms control agreements have led to significant, verifiable reductions in the U.S. and Russian nuclear arsenals, the two countries have ceased nuclear testing, and they have tightened checks on nuclear command and control.

But the potential for a catastrophic nuclear war remains. The core elements of Cold War-era U.S. nuclear strategy are largely the same, including the option to use nuclear weapons first and the maintenance of prompt-launch policies that still give the president unchecked authority to order the use of nuclear weapons.

Today, the United States and Russia deploy massive strategic nuclear arsenals consisting of up to 1,550 warheads on each side, as allowed under the 2010 New Strategic Arms Reduction Treaty. These numbers greatly exceed what it would take to decimate the other side and are far larger than required to deter a nuclear attack.

Worse still, each side maintains the capability to fire a significant portion of its land- and sea-based missiles promptly and retains plans to launch these forces, particularly land-based missiles, under attack to guard against a "disarming" first strike. U.S. and Russian leaders also still reserve the option to use nuclear weapons first.

As a result, President Donald Trump, whom Defense Secretary Jim Mattis reportedly described as having the intellect of a "fifth- or sixth-grader," has the authority to order the launch of some 800 nuclear warheads within about 15 minutes, with hundreds more weapons remaining in reserve. No other military or civilian official must approve the order. Congress currently has no say in the matter.

Continuing to vest such destructive power in the hands of one person is undemocratic, irresponsible, unnecessary and increasingly untenable. Cavalier and reckless statements from Trump about nuclear weapons use only underscore the folly of vesting such unchecked authority in one person.

Making matters worse, the Trump administration's Nuclear Posture Review expands the range of contingencies and options for potential nuclear use and proposes the development of "more-usable" low-yield nuclear weapons in order to give the president the flexibility to respond quickly in a crisis, including by using nuclear weapons first in response to a non-nuclear

attack.

The reality is that a launch-under-attack policy is unnecessary because U.S. nuclear forces and command-and-control systems could withstand even a massive attack. Given the size, accuracy, and diversity of U.S. forces, the remaining nuclear force would be more than sufficient to deliver a devastating blow to any nuclear aggressor.

In addition, keeping strategic forces on launch-under-attack mode increases the risk of miscalculation and misjudgment. Throughout the history of the nuclear age, there have been several incidents in which false signals of an attack have prompted U.S. and Russian officials to consider, in the dead of the night and under the pressure of time, launching nuclear weapons in retaliation. No U.S. leader should be put in a situation that could lead to the use of nuclear weapons based on false information.

Retaining the option to use nuclear weapons first is fraught with unnecessary peril. Given the overwhelming conventional military edge of the United States and its allies, there is no plausible circumstance that could justify legally, morally, or militarily the use of nuclear weapons to deal with a non-nuclear threat. Even in the event of a conventional military conflict with Russia, China, or North Korea, the first use of nuclear weapons would be counterproductive because it likely would trigger an uncontrollable, potentially suicidal all-out nuclear exchange.

Some in Washington and Brussels believe Moscow might use or threaten to use nuclear weapons first to try to deter NATO from pressing its conventional military advantage in a conflict. Clearly, a nuclear war cannot be won and should not be initiated by either side. The threat of first use, however, cannot overcome perceived or real conventional force imbalances and are not an effective substitute for prudently maintaining U.S. and NATO conventional forces in Europe.

As the major nuclear powers race to develop new nuclear capabilities and advanced conventional-strike weapons and consider using cybercapabilities to pre-empt nuclear attacks by adversaries, the risk that one leader may be tempted to use nuclear weapons first during a crisis likely will grow. A shift to a no-first-use posture, on the other hand, would increase strategic stability.

Although the Trump administration is not going to rethink nuclear old-think, leaders in Congress and the next administration must re-examine and revise outdated nuclear launch policies in ways that reduce the nuclear danger.

Shifting to a formal policy stating that the United States will not be the first to use nuclear weapons and that the sole purpose of nuclear weapons is to deter nuclear attack would be a significant and smart step in the right direction.

Deployment of new US nuclear warhead on submarine a dangerous step, critics say

The Guardian, by Julian Borger, 29 Jan 2020

The US has deployed its first low-yield Trident nuclear warhead on a submarine that is currently patrolling the Atlantic Ocean, it has been reported, in what arms control advocates warn is a dangerous step towards making a nuclear launch more likely.

According to the Federation of American Scientists, the USS Tennessee – which left port in Georgia at the end of last year – is the first submarine to go on patrol armed with the W76-2 warhead, commissioned by Donald Trump two years ago.

It has an explosive yield of five kilotons, a third of the power of the “Little Boy” bomb dropped on Hiroshima and considerably lower than the 90- and 455-kiloton warheads on other US submarine-launched ballistic missiles.

The Trump administration’s nuclear posture review (NPR) in February 2018, portrays this warhead as a counter to a perceived Russian threat to use its own “tactical” nuclear weapons to win a quick victory on the battlefield.

Advocates of W76-2 argued that the US had no effective deterrent against Russian tactical weapons because Moscow assumed Washington would not risk using the overwhelming power of its intercontinental ballistic missiles in response, for fear of escalating from a regional conflict to a civilian-destroying war.

Critics of the warhead say it accelerates a drift towards thinking of nuclear weapons as a means to fight and win wars, rather than as purely a deterrent of last resort. And the fielding of a tactical nuclear weapon, they warn, gives US political and military leaders a dangerous new option in confronting adversaries other than Russia.

Trump’s NPR says the US could use nuclear weapons in response to “significant non-nuclear strategic attacks”, including but not limited to “attacks on US, allied or partner civilian population or infrastructure”...

“We have had conversations with people inside, and they’ve been pretty clear that this has happened,” Kristensen said. “They see a need to talk about it to some extent, because if people don’t know it’s out there, then how can it deter?”

“This is a very rapid mind quick turnaround for a nuclear weapon, and that’s obviously because it was a fairly simple adjustment of an existing warhead,” he added. “They have argued that this is to deter Russia, but it also has clear implications or potential use against other adversaries, not least North Korea and Iran.”

Kristensen said: “Certainly the low-yield collateral effect that would come from this weapon would be very beneficial to a military officer who was going to advise to the president whether we should cross the nuclear threshold.”■
