



Role of Nuclear Weapons

Longstanding, Bipartisan Continuity in U.S. Nuclear Policy

The findings and recommendations of the 2018 Nuclear Posture Review (NPR) maintains the United States' traditional, bipartisan approach to nuclear policy: ensure a safe, secure, and effective nuclear deterrent while simultaneously pursuing nuclear nonproliferation and arms control efforts to advance security for the United States and its allies and partners.

Every NPR has emphasized that changes in the international security environment must shape U.S. nuclear policy, strategy, and posture. Despite the rapid deterioration of this environment since the 2010 NPR, the 2018 NPR does not increase the range of circumstances under which the U.S. would contemplate the use of nuclear weapons and does not increase our reliance on nuclear weapons.

Nuclear Weapons Roles

U.S. nuclear forces have complementary and interrelated roles within our national security strategy. The adequacy of these forces must be assessed against each role. As identified in the 2018 NPR, these roles are:

- ◆ Deterrence of nuclear and non-nuclear attack
- ◆ Assurance of allies and partners
- ◆ Achievement of U.S. objectives if deterrence fails
- ◆ Capacity to hedge against an uncertain future

“The declaratory policy outlined in the 2018 NPR is consistent with the declaratory policy outlined in the 2010 NPR. The United States would only consider the use of nuclear weapons in extreme circumstances to defend the vital interests of the United States, its allies and partners.”

– *Secretary of Defense Jim Mattis*

U.S. Declaratory Policy

Consistent with the 2010 NPR, U.S. nuclear declaratory policy remains that “the United States would only consider the employment of nuclear weapons in extreme circumstances to defend the vital interests of the United States, its allies, and partners.” To reduce the potential for adversary miscalculation in a crisis, the 2018 NPR clarifies that such extreme circumstances include, but are not limited to:

- ◆ Significant non-nuclear strategic attacks on U.S., allied, or partner civilian population or infrastructure
- ◆ Significant non-nuclear strategic attacks on U.S. or allied nuclear forces, their command and control, or warning and attack assessment capabilities

It remains the longstanding policy of the United States to retain some ambiguity regarding the precise circumstances that might lead to a U.S. nuclear response. Also consistent with previous policy, the 2018 NPR reiterates that, “The United States will not use or threaten to use nuclear weapons against non-nuclear weapons states that are party to the NPT [Treaty on the Non-Proliferation of Nuclear Weapons] and in compliance with their nuclear non-proliferation obligations.”