

# Nuclear rivals: Reviewing US nuclear strategy

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**Nuclear strategies, postures, and capabilities have returned to the forefront of international security debates. Against this backdrop, *Dr Lee Willett* considers the US Nuclear Posture Review in relation to those nations it aims to deter**

The re-emergence of state-based rivalry during the past decade has precipitated a returning international focus on nuclear matters. Although such rivalry has, militarily, manifested itself mostly in conventional activities, a significant nuclear dimension has also developed.

The US–Russia axis is central to this focus, with both powers proceeding with major nuclear force structure upgrades. Washington and Moscow have traded accusations of arms control treaty violations: the United States, for example, has argued that Russia's deployment of Iskander missiles to the Baltic exclave of Kaliningrad breaches the 1987 Intermediate Nuclear Forces (INF) accord.



*An unarmed Trident D-5 SLBM is launched from the SSBN USS Nebraska during the boat's Demonstration and Shakedown Operation (DASO) off California in March 2018. Under the 2018 Nuclear Posture Review the United States will introduce a low-yield warhead option for a select number of in-service D-5 missiles to increase US options for deterring low-end nuclear threats to allies. (US Navy)*

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Moscow, meanwhile, has voiced concerns about Washington's European Phased Adaptive Approach (EPAA) ballistic missile defence construct being assembled in Europe. Although the United States has regularly reiterated that the EPAA is designed only to deter ballistic missile threats

emanating from the Middle East, there has been discussion of whether the system has any relevance for deterring Russian ballistic and cruise missile threats.

Western leaders have also been concerned by the prominent role being played by nuclear weapons in major Russian military exercises. For example, the September 2017 'Zapad' exercise featured test launches of several dual-capable short-range ballistic missiles. Some analysts argue that integrating nuclear weapons in exercises in such a way outlines how Moscow might consider early use of nuclear weapons during a conflict to conclude hostilities on its own terms.

Meanwhile, increasing Russian submarine activity in the North Atlantic region is troubling NATO military and political leaders. While much of this activity involves diesel-electric- and nuclear-powered attack submarines (SSKs and SSNs respectively), the improved capabilities of Russia's Project 955/955A Dolgoruky (Borey)-class nuclear-powered ballistic missile submarines (SSBNs) are also carefully noted in Western navies. Furthermore, Russia has a long-stated aim of establishing a permanent Arctic SSBN presence.

SSBNs are featuring prominently in nuclear postures. In a perhaps unusual event the US Navy (USN) Ohio-class SSBN USS *Maryland* was pictured visiting HM Naval Base Clyde in Faslane, Scotland, in March. Although visits by US SSNs to Faslane are regular and routine, SSBN visits are perhaps less so. US Strategic Command noted, "The port visit strengthens co-operation between the United States and the United Kingdom, and demonstrates US capability, flexibility, and continuing commitment to its NATO allies." The Nuclear Posture Review (NPR) of President Donald Trump's administration stated that SSBNs "can demonstrate US nuclear presence and commitment for deterrence and assurance purposes via foreign port calls if desired".

In its 2017 report to Congress on Chinese military developments, the US Office of the Secretary of Defense (OSD) stated, "China's four operational Jin-class SSBNs represent China's first credible, sea-based nuclear deterrent". According to *Jane's Fighting Ships*, the fourth of these Type 094 boats was commissioned in 2015 and unconfirmed reports suggest the first deterrent patrol by the class occurred in 2016.

One of the most significant developments is the relatively rapid emergence of North Korea's nuclear capability, which was underscored in November 2017 with the first test of the Hwaseong-15/KN-22 intercontinental ballistic missile (ICBM). Following the test, Pyongyang's Korean Central News Agency quoted leader Kim Jong-un as declaring that North Korea had now "finally realised the great historic cause of completing the state nuclear force". The Hwaseong-15's test launch – and prospective operational arrival this year – followed North Korea's sixth nuclear warhead test, in September 2017. In demonstrating sufficient range to reach the continental United States, North Korean ICBMs have also shown they can reach Europe. NATO Deputy Secretary General Rose Gottemoeller told *Jane's* previously that North Korea "is now a global threat because [its] missiles have now brought Europe as well as North America into range".

Just as North Korea's nuclear programme developed rapidly, so, too, did plans for an unprecedented summit between the United States and North Korea that, as of this writing, was still scheduled to take place in Singapore this month. It is widely recognised that North Korea's nuclear programme would be central in any summit discussions. However, the summit was thrown into doubt almost as quickly as it came about. In May, in remarks covered by state media, North Korean Vice Foreign Minister Kim Kye-gwan said that if the United States "corners us and unilaterally demands we give up nuclear weapons we will no longer have an interest in talks". This statement emphasised the

centrality of nuclear issues in Korean peninsular security and Pyongyang's view of the importance of nuclear weapons to North Korean national security.

A landmark nuclear engagement that is also at risk is the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA) agreement, signed in 2015 by Iran and the 'P5+1' powers (China, France, Russia, the United Kingdom, and the United States, plus Germany). In May Washington announced its unilateral withdrawal from the JCPOA on the grounds that the deal did not support US national security interests.

Of course, the United States played a critical role in building the JCPOA and it remains to be seen if the accord can remain in force without US participation. Some argue that if the deal does fail, Iran may become a source of nuclear risk and tension for Washington alongside China, North Korea, and Russia.

There is no consensus that Cold War-level nuclear tensions have returned, but continuing nuclear weapon capability developments, prominent statements relating to nuclear capabilities and postures, and the absence of active bilateral and multilateral arms controls involving the nuclear powers raise questions about how the current nuclear focus will affect wider international stability.

### **Posture reviewed**

One of the most prominent nuclear-related developments has been the publication, in February, of the latest US NPR. The previous review was published in 2010 and, although there was a long gap between the two reviews, President Trump's first NPR generally reinforced a nuclear capability upgrade plan that was drawn up by the previous Obama administration. However, between the two reviews there were significant shifts in the security environment, particularly in terms of the re-emergence of state-based competition and tension.

The NPR noted increased uncertainty in a strategic environment in which "global threat conditions have worsened markedly since [2010]". Such uncertainty can manifest itself in several forms, but the review highlighted two in particular: the risks of sudden geopolitical shifts and rapid technological breakouts.

**[Continued in full version...]**

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