



ANALYSIS

THE BIDEN ADMINISTRATION'S NUCLEAR WEAPONS EMPLOYMENT GUIDANCE—INCREASED COST AND REDUCED DETERRENT EFFECTIVENESS

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In August 2024, it was reported that, “President Joe Biden has approved revisions to a classified nuclear strategic document that redirects Washington’s deterrent strategy to focus on China’s nuclear arsenal expansion for the first time...”¹ In 2024, two senior Biden Administration officials spoke about the possible need to increase the number of U.S. nuclear weapons.² The new unclassified Biden Administration nuclear weapons employment guidance report, issued in November 2024, stated that “...it may be necessary to adapt current U.S. force capability, posture, composition, or size in order to be able to fulfill the three stated roles of nuclear weapons.”³ When issuing this report, the Department of Defense indicated, “The Guidance also directs that the United States plan to deter multiple nuclear-armed adversaries simultaneously...”⁴ The Biden Administration took no action to implement this important policy change; rather, it left the decision on increasing U.S. nuclear weapons to the incoming Trump Administration.⁵

The Biden Administration’s Unclassified Nuclear Weapons Employment Guidance Report

To its credit, the Biden Administration report stated that, “The Guidance continues to emphasize the need to, first and foremost, hold at risk what adversaries value most. It also reiterates the need to maintain counterforce capabilities to reduce potential adversaries’

¹ “Biden’s Secret Nuclear Weapons Strategy: Everything We Know About New Plan,” *Newsweek*, August 20, 2024, available at <https://www.newsweek.com/bidens-secret-nuclear-weapons-strategy-everything-we-know-about-new-plan-1942076>.

² Pranay Vaddi, “Adapting the U.S. Approach to Arms Control and Nonproliferation to a New Era,” Arms Control Association, June 7, 2024, available at <https://www.armscontrol.org/2024AnnualMeeting/Pranay-Vaddi-remarks: 'Nuclear Threats and the Role of Allies': Remarks by Acting Assistant Secretary of Defense for Space Policy Dr. Vipin Narang at CSIS.> August 1, 2024, available at <https://www.defense.gov/News/Speeches/Speech/Article/3858311/nuclear-threats-and-the-role-of-allies-remarks-by-acting-assistant-secretary-of/>.

³ Department of Defense, “Report on the Nuclear Employment Strategy of the United States,” Department of Defense, November 2024, p. 4, available at <https://media.defense.gov/2024/Nov/15/2003584623/-1/-1/1/REPORT-ON-THE-NUCLEAR-EMPLOYMENT-STRATEGY-OF-THE-UNITED-STATES.PDF>.

⁴ Department of Defense, “DOD Sends Report to Congress on the Nuclear Weapons Employment Strategy of the United States,” Department of Defense, November 15, 2024, available at <https://www.defense.gov/News/Releases/Release/Article/3966543/dod-sends-report-to-congress-on-the-nuclear-weapons-employment-strategy-of-the/>.

⁵ Michael R. Gordon, “U.S. Must Be Prepared to Expand Nuclear-Weapons Force, Biden Officials Say,” *The Wall Street Journal*, November 15, 2024, available at <https://www.wsj.com/politics/national-security/u-s-must-be-prepared-to-expand-nuclear-weapons-force-biden-officials-say-3f317fc9>.



ability to employ nuclear weapons against the United States and its allies and partners, and does not rely on a counter-value or minimum-deterrence approach.”⁶ It continued:

Updated elements of the Guidance evolved from prior iterations by:

- Requiring that planning accounts for the new deterrence challenges posed by the growth, modernization, and increasing diversity of potential adversaries’ nuclear arsenals;
- Directing that the United States be able to deter Russia, the PRC [China], and the DPRK [North Korea] simultaneously in peacetime, crisis, and conflict;
- Effectuating the 2022 NPR decision to rely on non-nuclear overmatch to deter regional aggression by Iran as long as Iran does not possess a nuclear weapon;
- Requiring the integration of non-nuclear capabilities into U.S. nuclear planning where non-nuclear capabilities can support the nuclear deterrence mission;
- Stressing the importance of managing escalation in U.S. planning for responding to limited strategic attack; and
- Enabling deeper consultation, coordination, and combined planning with NATO and Indo-Pacific allies and partners in order to strengthen U.S. extended deterrence commitments.⁷

The Biden Administration deserves credit for adopting conclusions concerning the new multipolar nuclear threats the United States faces similar to those reached by the bipartisan Congressional Commission on the Strategic Posture of the United States. Its guidance report stated that “...the evidence of growing collaboration and collusion between Russia, the PRC, the DPRK, and Iran makes the situation even more challenging. There is a possibility of coordinated or opportunistic aggression by a combination of adversaries in a crisis or conflict, which requires U.S. strategists to think carefully about complex escalation dynamics and deterring multiple adversaries simultaneously, including in extended crises or conflicts.”⁸ However, it took *none* of the Commission’s report recommendations on enhancing U.S. strategic nuclear deterrence capabilities.⁹

Since 1997, there has been a large reduction in U.S. strategic nuclear weapons numbers and no modernization of strategic delivery vehicles. Two of the three best Reagan-era counterforce weapons—the Peacekeeper ICBM and the Advanced Cruise Missile — were eliminated by the George W. Bush Administration without replacement. The Obama Administration eliminated the nuclear sea-launched Tomahawk land attack missile (TLAM-N) and decided on the eventual elimination of all U.S. nuclear bombs that could seriously

⁶ “Report on the Nuclear Employment Strategy of the United States,” 2024. op. cit., p. 3.

⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 2.

⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 1.

⁹ Mark B. Schneider, “The October 2023 Strategic Commission Report and U.S. Nuclear Weapons Requirements,” *Information Series*, No. 568 (Fairfax, VA: National Institute Press, December 1, 2023), pp. viii, 34, 35, 43, 45, 46, 48, available at https://nipp.org/information_series/mark-b-schneider-the-october-2023-strategic-commission-report-and-u-s-nuclear-weapons-requirements-no-568-december-1-2023/.

threaten *very hard* and *very deeply* buried bunkers.¹⁰ Without these weapons, U.S. nuclear forces cannot effectively threaten what President Putin values most—his life and well-being, which are protected by Russia’s new, deep underground bunkers.¹¹ The United States does not have sufficient deployed nuclear weapons with the right technical characteristics to deter multiple nuclear adversaries or, indeed, even to target effectively Russia or China alone.¹²

An analysis by the Federation of American Scientists authored by Adam Mount and Hans Kristensen denied that the new Biden guidance shifted emphasis from Russia to China and pointed out the limits in the changes it mandated. It stated that the guidance report does not require U.S. forces to: 1) maintain the capability to limit damage against multiple adversaries simultaneously; 2) “maintain the capability to perform other or all objectives against multiple adversaries...”; and 3) “limit damage against multiple peer adversaries...[or] restore deterrence in the event that it fails....”¹³ They also said that the Biden guidance did “...not endorse the recommendation of the Strategic Posture Commission that China’s buildup demands that the United States follow suit.”¹⁴

Moreover, they pointed out, “The language of the employment strategy report does not clearly indicate whether U.S. forces are required to perform these more demanding objectives. The president could have stated, for example, that U.S. forces are not required to maintain the capability to limit damage against multiple adversaries simultaneously.”¹⁵ The authors noted that the guidance “...does not explicitly use the ‘two peer’ description frequently used in the public debate by defense officials and others.”¹⁶

These omissions probably reflected the fact that the Biden Administration did not want to admit that it was allowing China to achieve nuclear parity and that the nuclear forces in the U.S. program of record could not achieve these objectives.

Even if one takes the Biden Administration’s description of its new guidance at face value, the mandated good changes can only partially deal with the rapidly growing multipolar nuclear threats. In 2022, then-STRATCOM Commander Admiral Charles Richard observed:

- “This Ukraine crisis that we’re in right now, this is just the warmup.”
- “The big one is coming. And it isn’t going to be very long before we’re going to get tested in ways that we haven’t been tested a long time.”

¹⁰ Department of Defense, *Nuclear Posture Review Report*, Department of Defense, April 2010, available at https://dod.defense.gov/portals/1/features/defensereviews/npr/2010_nuclear_posture_review_report.pdf.

¹¹ Mark B. Schneider, “Biden’s NPR: Assured Survival for Vladimir Putin,” *Real Clear Defense*, April 21, 2022, available at https://www.realcleardefense.com/2022/04/21/bidens_npr_assured_survival_for_vladimir_putin_828255.html.

¹² Schneider, “The October 2023 Strategic Commission Report and U.S. Nuclear Weapons Requirements,” op, cit.

¹³ Adam Mount and Hans Kristensen, “Biden Nuclear Weapons Employment Guidance Leaves Nuclear Decisions to Trump,” Federation of American Scientists, December 5, 2024, available at <https://fas.org/publication/biden-nuclear-weapons-employment-guidance-leaves-nuclear-decisions-to-trump/>.

¹⁴ Ibid.

¹⁵ Loc. cit.

¹⁶ Loc. cit.

- “As I assess our level of deterrence against China, the ship is slowly sinking.”¹⁷

The key question that the Trump Administration will face is whether the Biden Administration’s changes are actually good ones, or to use Admiral Richard’s metaphor, are simply rearranging the deck chairs on the Titanic.

Both the unclassified guidance report and the classified version of the Biden guidance should be carefully reviewed by the Trump Administration, even before initiating a full scale nuclear posture review. President Trump issued his own nuclear employment guidance report in 2020.¹⁸ Much of it, even if dated, is significantly better, more comprehensive and informative than the Biden version. Some of the new Biden language should be adopted; the bad elements should be rejected.

Deterring Iran

The Biden nuclear employment guidance report stated that, “The United States remains resolved to prevent Iran from developing a nuclear weapon and is prepared to use all elements of national power to ensure that outcome.”¹⁹ However, in December 2024, White House Communications Advisor Rear Admiral (ret.) John Kirby acknowledged that the Biden Administration’s effort to prevent Iran from obtaining nuclear weapons through diplomacy “...didn’t work....”²⁰ Reportedly, “Mohammad-Javad Larijani, a close aide to Iran’s Supreme Leader Ayatollah Ali Khamenei, made a shocking statement, declaring that Iran could develop military nuclear capabilities within just one day.”²¹ The statement in the nuclear employment guidance report that the United States will “...rely on non-nuclear overmatch to deter regional aggression by Iran as long as Iran does not possess a nuclear weapon,” appears to be dangerous wishful thinking.

The Biden Administration even sought to protect Iranian nuclear capabilities from an Israeli attack in response to the two large scale Iranian missile strikes on Israel, not to mention Iranian support of vicious terrorist attacks against Israel. When asked by reporters

¹⁷ C. Todd Lopez, “Stratcom Commander Says U.S. Should Look to 1950s to Regain Competitive Edge,” *DOD News*, November 3, 2022, available at <https://www.defense.gov/News/News-Stories/Article/Article/3209416/stratcom-commander-says-us-should-look-to-1950s-to-regain-competitive-edge/#:~:text=Charles%20A.,been%20tested%20a%20long%20time.%22./>.

¹⁸ Department of Defense, “Report on the Nuclear Employment Strategy of the United States—2020,” Department of Defense, November 30, 2020, available at https://www.esd.whs.mil/Portals/54/Documents/FOID/Reading%20Room/NCB/21-F-0591_2020_Report_of_the_Nuclear_Employment_Strategy_of_the_United_States.pdf.

¹⁹ “Report on the Nuclear Employment Strategy of the United States,” 2024, op. cit., p. 2.

²⁰ Jan Hanchett, “White House: Our Attempts at Keeping Iran from Getting Nukes Through Diplomacy ‘Didn’t Work,’” *Breitbart.com*, December 14, 2024, available at <https://www.breitbart.com/clips/2024/12/14/white-house-our-attempts-at-keeping-iran-from-getting-nukes-through-diplomacy-didnt-work/>.

²¹ “‘In 24 Hours, Nukes...’: Iran’s Shocking Nuclear Announcement After Russia’s Warning,” *The Times of India*, November 19, 2024, available at <https://timesofindia.indiatimes.com/videos/international/in-24-hours-nukes-irans-shocking-nuclear-announcement-after-russias-warning/videoshow/115458978.cms>.

whether he would back an Israeli attack on Iranian nuclear sites, then-President Biden replied, “The answer is no.”²²

Reportedly, even the rather weak 2001 *Nuclear Posture Review* applied nuclear deterrence to Iran.²³ The threat of chemical and biological attacks must be deterred because of their lethality. The United States and its allies lack any in-kind deterrent to address these threats. Conventional weapons are not an effective deterrent against these types of attacks because of the vast difference in lethality. Moreover, the U.S. stockpile of advanced conventional munitions was dramatically reduced by the Biden Administration’s budgets and the wars in Ukraine and the Middle East.²⁴

Dealing with Belarus

Despite joint nuclear strike exercises, Russian provision of tactical nuclear weapons to Belarus, and Belorussian nuclear threats, there was no indication in the unclassified Biden guidance report that the United States applied nuclear deterrence to Belarus.²⁵ In December 2024, President Putin stated that Russia may deploy the Oreshnik missile, which Russia had just launched against Ukraine, in Belarus in 2025.²⁶ Indeed, Belarus President Alexander Lukashenko later indicated that ten Oreshnik missiles would be deployed in Belarus in 2025.²⁷ The U.S. Department of Defense stated the Oreshnik was “...an experimental intermediate range ballistic missile...based on Russia’s RS-26 Rubezh intercontinental

²² Trevor Hunnicutt, Matt Spetalnick and Jasper Ward, “Biden says US would not support Israeli strike on Iran nuclear sites,” *Reuters*, October 2, 2024, available at <https://www.reuters.com/world/middle-east/biden-says-he-does-not-support-attack-irans-nuclear-sites-2024-10-02/>.

²³ Philipp C. Bleek, “Nuclear Posture Review Leaks; Outlines Targets, Contingencies,” *Arms Control Today*, April 1, 2002, available at <https://www.armscontrol.org/act/2002-04/press-releases/nuclear-posture-review-leaks-outlines-targets-contingencies>.

²⁴ Bill Gertz, “Admiral warns Ukraine aid depleting U.S. missile stocks,” *The Washington Times*, November 22, 2024, available at <https://www.washingtontimes.com/news/2024/nov/22/adm-sam-paparo-warns-ukraine-aid-depleting-us-miss/>.

²⁵ “Putin Ally Issues Nuclear Warning to NATO,” *Newsweek*, September 27, 2024, available at <https://www.newsweek.com/putin-ally-nuclear-warning-nato-lukashenko-belarus-nato-1960339>.; “Belarusian missile crews practice operation of Iskander missiles carrying special warheads,” *TASS*, August 25, 2023, available at <https://tass.com/defense/1665627>.; “Russia, Belarus practice readying tactical nuclear forces and capabilities in joint drills,” *TASS*, June 13, 2024, available at <https://tass.com/defense/1802803>; Mark B. Schneider, “The Russian Non-Strategic (Tactical) Nuclear Exercise,” *Real Clear Defense*, September 17, 2024, available at https://www.realcleardefense.com/articles/2024/09/17/the_russian_non-strategic_tactical_nuclear_exercise_1058803.html; Jack Detsch, “Russia’s Nuclear Weapons Are Now in Belarus,” *Foreign Policy*, March 14, 2024, available at <https://foreignpolicy.com/2024/03/14/russia-nuclear-weapons-belarus-putin/>.

²⁶ “Russia ready to deploy Oreshnik in Belarus in 2025 — Putin,” *TASS*, December 6, 2024, available at <https://tass.com/politics/1883517>.

²⁷ “Lukashenko Reveals Plans For Russian Oreshnik Missile Deployment In Belarus,” *Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty*, December 10, 2024, available at <https://www.rferl.org/a/lukashenko-russia-oreshnik-missile-deployment-belarus-putin-ukraine/33234767.html>.

ballistic missile model.”²⁸ The Oreshnik is nuclear-capable,²⁹ carrying six nuclear warheads.³⁰

Arms Control and Nuclear Deterrence

There are two important realities impacting the potential role of arms control on nuclear deterrence. As the bipartisan United States Strategic Posture Commission pointed out “...there is no prospect of a meaningful arms control Treaty being negotiated with Russia in the foreseeable future...” and that, “Over the past 20 years, Russia has either violated or has failed to comply with nearly every major arms control treaty or agreement to which the United States is or was a party.”³¹ It continued, “...given Russia’s history of noncompliance and illegal treaty suspensions, and China’s continued intransigence on arms control dialogue, the United States cannot develop its strategic posture based on the assumption that arms control agreements are imminent or will always be in force.”³² The November 2024 launch of the Oreshnik missile violated the Ballistic Missile Launch Notification Agreement, which is incorporated by reference in the New START Treaty. Deployment of the Oreshnik in Belarus in 2025 would further violate the New START Treaty.

Pranay Vaddi, then-Special Assistant to President Biden and Senior Director for Arms Control, Disarmament, and Nonproliferation at the National Security Council observed that, “Russia, the PRC and North Korea are all expanding and diversifying their nuclear arsenals at a breakneck pace—showing little or no interest in arms control.”³³ Despite these assessments, the Biden guidance report was unrealistic about the role of arms control in nuclear deterrence. The report stated that, “Arms control, risk reduction, and nuclear nonproliferation play indispensable roles as well.”³⁴ It failed to explain why.

Russia continues to violate the New START Treaty by: 1) denying the United States its critical on-site inspection rights, 2) ceasing to provide the legally required notifications, and

²⁸ Department of Defense, “Deputy Pentagon Press Secretary Sabrina Singh Holds a Press Briefing,” Department of Defense, November 21, 2024, available at <https://www.defense.gov/News/Transcripts/Transcript/Article/3975265/deputy-pentagon-press-secretary-sabrina-singh-holds-a-press-briefing/>.

²⁹ “Meeting with the Defence Ministry leadership, representatives of the military-industrial complex and missile system developers,” *Kremlin.ru*, November 22, 2024, available at <http://en.kremlin.ru/events/president/news/75623>.

³⁰ Mark B. Schneider, “Military and Arms Control Implications of the New Russian Oreshnik Missile,” *Real Clear Defense*, December 17, 2024, available at https://www.realcleardefense.com/articles/2024/12/17/military_and_arms_control_implications_of_the_new_russian_oreshnik_missile_1079036.html.

³¹ Madelyn Creedon and Jon Kyl, et al., Congressional Commission on the Strategic Posture of the United States, *America’s Strategic Posture, The Final Report of the Congressional Commission on the Strategic Posture of the United States*, Institute for Defense Analysis, 2023, p. 84, available at <https://www.ida.org/-/media/feature/publications/a/am/americas-strategic-posture/strategic-posture-commission-report.ashx>.

³² *Ibid.*, p. 109.

³³ Vaddi, “Adapting the U.S. Approach to Arms Control and Nonproliferation to a New Era,” *op. cit.*

³⁴ “Report on the Nuclear Employment Strategy of the United States,” 2024, *op. cit.*

3) illegally “suspending” its participation in New START.³⁵ While Russia made the self-serving claim that it is continuing to observe the limitations of the New START Treaty, the U.S. Department of State, starting in its 2023 annual report on the New START Treaty, said that it was unable to certify Russian compliance with the numerical limitations of the Treaty.³⁶ A November 2024 report by the Defense Intelligence Agency (DIA) confirmed that Russia was in violation of the New START Treaty’s deployed warhead limit of 1,550. It stated:

Russia has maintained the largest foreign nuclear stockpile in the world. Moscow maintains about 1,550 deployed strategic nuclear warheads on ICBMs and submarine-launched ballistic missiles (SLBMs), as well as a force of heavy bombers which are capable of carrying long-range air-launched cruise missiles (ALCMs). Under the New Strategic Arms Reduction Treaty (New START) counting rules, the heavy bombers count as one warhead each, but each bomber is capable of carrying eight or more air-launched cruise missiles.³⁷

Thus, the loss of on-site inspections is vitally important as long as the United States imposes the substantive New START limitations on itself. Indeed, in 2020, former Under Secretary of State and chief New START Treaty negotiator Rose Gottemoeller wrote “...we discarded *reciprocal inspections*; in fact, we did not need telemetry measures to confirm compliance with the warhead limits in the new treaty.”³⁸ (Emphasis added). There has not been a New START Treaty on-site inspection since March 2020, more than enough time for Russia to have uploaded all or nearly all of its strategic missile force.³⁹ If Russia has uploaded its missiles, its number of deployed nuclear warheads would be much higher than the 1,550 warheads assessed by DIA.

The Biden Administration’s nuclear employment guidance rewarded Russia for violating New START by mandating U.S. compliance with a Treaty Russia is violating.

³⁵ U.S. Department of State, Office of the Spokesperson, “Russian Noncompliance with and Invalid Suspension of the New START Treaty,” Fact Sheet, U.S. Department of State, June 1, 2023, available at <https://www.state.gov/russian-noncompliance-with-and-invalid-suspension-of-the-new-start-treaty/>.

³⁶ U.S. Department of State, “Report to Congress on Implementation of the New START Treaty Pursuant to paragraph (a)(10) of the Senate’s Resolution of Advice and Consent to Ratification of the New START Treaty (Treaty Doc. 111-5) NEW START TREATY ANNUAL IMPLEMENTATION REPORT,” U.S. Department of State, 2023, p. 5, available at <https://www.state.gov/wp-content/uploads/2023/01/2022-New-START-Implementation-Report.pdf>.

³⁷ Defense Intelligence Agency, *NUCLEAR CHALLENGES - The Growing Capabilities of Strategic Competitors and Regional Rival* (Washington, D.C.: Defense Intelligence Agency, November 2024), p. IX, available at https://www.dia.mil/Portals/110/Images/News/Military_Powers_Publications/Nuclear_Challenges_2024.pdf.

³⁸ Rose Gottemoeller, “The New START Verification Regime: How Good Is It?,” *Bulletin of the Atomic Scientists*, May 21, 2020, available at <https://thebulletin.org/2020/05/the-new-start-verification-regime-how-good-is-it/>.

³⁹ Mark B. Schneider, “The Death of the New START Treaty,” *Information Series*, No. 560 (Fairfax, VA: National Institute Press, August 7, 2023), available at https://nipp.org/information_series/mark-b-schneider-the-death-of-the-new-start-treaty-no-560-august-7-2023.

The Lack of a Programmatic Response to Implement the New Guidance

In June 2024, Pranay Vaddi stated that the United States had responded to the increased threat by: 1) pursuing the B61-13 nuclear bomb as a replacement for the “outdated” B83 nuclear bomb, 2) seeking to life extend certain Trident submarines, and 3) bolstering U.S. deterrence without increasing the number of nuclear weapons.⁴⁰ Despite these announced actions, the Biden Administration did little in reality to respond to the threats it assessed.

The B61-13 bomb while a useful addition to the U.S. capability is less capable than the B83 bomb against *very hard* and *very deeply* buried facilities—including the ones that President Putin depends on to keep himself alive in a nuclear war.⁴¹ The first Trump Administration wisely reversed the Obama Administration’s decision to retire the B83 without replacement. The Chairman of the House Armed Services Committee Congressman Mike Rogers (R-AL) and Senator Roger F. Wicker (R-MS), Ranking Member of the Senate Armed Services Committee, correctly observed that the B61-13 “is only a modest step in the right direction. The B61-13 is not a long-term solution....”⁴² Indeed, the B61-13 is *not a full replacement* for the B83. This is important because the last thing the United States should want is to have President Putin believe that he can initiate a nuclear war and survive in his deep underground bunkers. The United States actually needs a better weapon than the B83,⁴³ most likely a robust nuclear earth penetrator.

The Trident life extension was an emergency measure designed to prevent a decline in U.S. capability due to a delay in the Columbia class ballistic missile replacement program.⁴⁴

In August 2024, then-Acting Assistant Secretary of Defense Dr. Vipin Narang stated that the Biden Administration had ended its opposition to the nuclear SLCM program.⁴⁵ In reality, the Navy is continuing to slow-roll it, even claiming that it will “require an entirely new industrial base.”⁴⁶ Its projected availability date is about 17 years after President Trump directed the program in the 2018 *Nuclear Posture Review*. Former Deputy Assistant Secretary of Defense Dr. Robert Soofer has stated, “We have a missile, a Tomahawk missile,

⁴⁰ Vaddi, “Adapting the U.S. Approach to Arms Control and Nonproliferation to a New Era,” op. cit., p. 5.

⁴¹ Mark B. Schneider, “Putin’s New Assured Survival Nuclear Bunker,” *Real Clear Defense*, December 1, 2020, available at https://www.realcleardefense.com/articles/2020/12/01/putins_new_assured_survival_nuclear_bunker_651424.html.

⁴² “Wicker, Rogers Statement on B61-13 Gravity Bomb,” Press Release, October 27, 2023, available at <https://www.wicker.senate.gov/2023/10/wicker-rogers-statement-on-b61-13-gravity-bomb>.

⁴³ Bill Gertz, “U.S. Lacks Nuclear Weapon for Hardened Underground Targets,” *The Washington Free Beacon*, September 6, 2018, available at <https://freebeacon.com/national-security/u-s-lacks-nuclear-weapon-hardened-underground-targets/>.

⁴⁴ Creedon and Kyl, et al., *America’s Strategic Posture, The Final Report of the Congressional Commission on the Strategic Posture of the United States*, op. cit., p. 44.

⁴⁵ Remarks by Acting Assistant Secretary of Defense for Space Policy Dr. Vipin Narang at CSIS,” Department of Defense, August 1, 2024, available at <https://www.defense.gov/News/Speeches/Speech/Article/3858311/nuclear-threats-and-the-role-of-allies-remarks-by-acting-assistant-secretary-of/>.

⁴⁶ Sydney J. Freedberg Jr., “Sub-launched nuclear cruise missile will need ‘an entirely new industrial base,’ warns Navy admiral, *Breaking Defense*, November 15, 2024, available at <https://breakingdefense.com/2024/11/sub-launched-nuclear-cruise-missile-will-need-an-entirely-new-industrial-base-warns-navy-admiral/>.

that has been upgraded continuously to the Block V. It's got the range that we need," and, "I guarantee you that the labs can put a nuclear warhead on that."⁴⁷

The SLCM-N is vital because it: 1) enhances the survivability of U.S. nuclear forces; 2) provides the *only* survivable U.S. theater nuclear force, and 3) potentially could also form the basis of a survivable strategic reserve force.

Combining Nuclear and Conventional Strikes

The Biden Administration's nuclear employment guidance stated:

While recognizing that nuclear weapons continue to provide unique deterrence effects that no other element of U.S. military power can replace, the Guidance places greater emphasis on the use of non-nuclear capabilities to support the nuclear deterrence mission, where feasible. Such integration allows the Joint Force to combine nuclear and non-nuclear capabilities in complementary ways that leverage the individual characteristics of diverse forces.⁴⁸

Attempting to combine nuclear and conventional strikes into a single war plan in *which there is an attempt to substitute conventional for nuclear capabilities*, is a losing proposition. Conventional weapons cannot substitute for nuclear weapons in a combined war plan because: 1) there is a qualitative difference in lethality between nuclear and conventional weapons, which means that vast numbers of expensive conventional missiles would have to be procured; 2) the conventional systems would have to be given nuclear and electromagnetic pulse hardening, which the Electromagnetic Pulse Commission determined to be impractical for all conventional munitions because of the cost;⁴⁹ 3) the threat of GPS jamming and other forms of GPS denial, would make dependence on GPS guidance very risky;⁵⁰ 4) thousands of expensive conventional weapons would have to be withheld from the conventional war plans and somehow maintained in a survivable configuration (probably financially impossible) to have a significant deterrent impact against nuclear weapons first use; 5) since conventional earth penetrators cannot generally destroy targets any deeper than they can penetrate,⁵¹ which is limited, conventional weapons generally have

⁴⁷ Ibid.

⁴⁸ "Report on the Nuclear Employment Strategy of the United States," 2024, op. cit., p. 3.

⁴⁹ Dr. John S. Foster, Jr. et. al., *Report of the Commission to Assess the Threat to the United States from Electromagnetic Pulse (EMP) Attack*, Volume 1: Executive Report, 2004, p. 47, available at https://www.empcommission.org/docs/empc_exec_rpt.pdf.

⁵⁰ General Michael Hostage III, Commander, USAF Air Combat Command, "Future of the Combat Air Force." AFA - Air & Space Conference and Technology Exposition, September 16, 2014, available at <https://www.af.mil/Portals/1/documents/af%20events/Speeches/16SEP2014-Gen-Michael-Hostage-Future-of-the-Combat-AF-AFA-Conference.pdf>.

⁵¹ "Summary," of *Effects of Nuclear and Earth Penetrator and Other Weapons*, National Academies of Sciences, Engineering, and Medicine (Washington, D.C.: The National Academies Press, 2005), available at <https://doi.org/10.17226/11282>.

little effect against *very hard* and *very deeply* buried targets, and 6) the effectiveness of the conventional strikes would be limited, as likely would be their deterrent effect.

To give some idea of how many expensive precision guided conventional missiles would have to be procured to substitute for a relatively small number of nuclear weapons, it is worth noting that during the recent Eisenhower carrier strike group deployment to the Middle East, 135 Tomahawk Land Attack Missiles were reportedly launched against Houthi terrorist targets and the carrier's aircraft dropped 420 air-to-ground weapons.⁵² Despite these attacks, the Houthi terrorists were able to continue their missile attacks.⁵³

Protracted conventional strikes of the type conducted in a conventional conflict are not practical if an adversary is using nuclear weapons against U.S. forces and U.S. adversaries know this. The U.S. inventory of precision conventional weapons is inadequate. Indeed, less than three weeks after the nuclear employment guidance had been made public, White House National Security Advisor Jake Sullivan stated that U.S. munitions would be exhausted in a China conflict "very rapidly."⁵⁴ Hence, the threat of conventional attacks is unlikely to have any significant deterrent effect against nuclear escalation.

Dr. Christopher Yeaw, a noted nuclear weapons expert and former senior government official, calculated that the U.S. attack on the Al Shayrat Airbase in Syria which used 58 Tomahawk cruise missiles could have been duplicated by three 7-kiloton nuclear weapons.⁵⁵ It is clear that if limiting collateral damage were not a major consideration, the base could have been completely destroyed with a single high-yield nuclear weapon. Dr. Yeaw pointed out that vast numbers of theater targets exist, creating a requirement for very large numbers of conventional cruise missiles. While he did not address this issue, the cost of repairing conventional weapons damage and the speed at which it can be accomplished is much greater for conventional than nuclear weapons because of the inhibiting impact of residual radiation.

In a conventional war, many targets that *are not very hard* and *not very deeply* buried can be destroyed by protracted conventional attacks. However, even if the United States had a large munitions stockpile, conducting protracted attacks would be impossible if an adversary is employing nuclear weapons against the United States and its allies. The threat of protracted conventional attack is not an effective deterrent because U.S. adversaries know that this is not feasible if they strike first with substantial numbers of even low-yield nuclear weapons.

⁵² Usman Ansari, "The Most Intense Sea Combat Since WW2," in Ian Ballantyne ed., *Guide to the US Navy 2025* (London: Sundial Magazines Ltd., September 13, 2024), p. 66.

⁵³ "Houthi Ballistic Missiles Impact Israel-linked Anadolu S Ship In Red Sea 'Accurate & Direct Hit,'" *Times of India*, November 20, 2024, available at <https://timesofindia.indiatimes.com/videos/international/houthi-ballistic-missiles-impact-israel-linked-anadolu-s-ship-in-red-sea-accurate-direct-hit/videoshow/115475039.cms>.

⁵⁴ Bill Gertz, "Pentagon alert: U.S. runs out of missiles in a 'matter of days' in China war, can't match production," *The Washington Times*, December 5, 2024, available at <https://www.washingtontimes.com/news/2024/dec/5/congress-u-defense-industry-unable-supply-weapons-/>.

⁵⁵ Dr. Christopher Yeaw, "Geopolitical Nuclear Force Context with a Focus on China," National Strategic Research Institute University of Nebraska, 2024, mimeo.

The cost of conventional capabilities is high. The platforms that carry and deploy the conventional missiles (bombers, strike fighters, surface ships and submarines) are much more expensive than the missiles themselves. For example, the cost of a Tomahawk Block 5 missile is reportedly \$1,890,000 per round.⁵⁶ Ballistic and hypersonic missiles are usually far more expensive.

To *increase* the capability of U.S. conventional forces to launch non-nuclear missiles as an intended substitute for one-to-three nuclear missiles *after* a nuclear attack on the United States and its allies would cost billions. One-to-three nuclear SLCMs would require no additional ships to deploy them and could accomplish the same objective and do it more effectively.

Clearly, President Biden had no intention of increasing defense spending to fund a serious effort to substitute conventional for nuclear strike. (Similarly, the George W. Bush Administration never built its conventional “New Triad,” which supposedly was to substitute for the nuclear weapons reductions it made.)⁵⁷ Moreover, the seriously eroded U.S. military production base cannot support the increased reliance on conventional weapons that the Biden nuclear employment guidance report pretended to direct. In reality, the Biden guidance will be all but ignored by the military because it is economically prohibitive. Hence, the supposed enhanced reliance on conventional weapons was apparently a political fig leaf.

Missing Elements in the Nuclear Employment Guidance

There are missing elements in the Biden Administration’s nuclear employment guidance that should be restored even on an interim basis. A good starting point would be elements from the Reagan Administration’s Nuclear Employment Guidance. These include:

- “The most fundamental national security objective is to deter direct attack—particularly nuclear attack—on the United States and its Allies. Should nuclear attack nonetheless occur, the United States and its Allies must prevail.”
- “Our nuclear forces (both the strategic Triad and theater forces), in conjunction with general purpose forces, must hold at risk the full range of enemy military capabilities that threaten the United States and its Allies.”
- “The United States must be able to deny the Soviet Union a military victory at any level of conflict and for it to seek the earliest termination of hostilities on terms favorable to the United States.”

⁵⁶ Tyler Rogoway, “What The Navy’s Ship-Launched Missiles Actually Cost,” *The War Zone*, May 21, 2024, available <https://www.twz.com/sea/what-the-navys-ship-launched-missiles-actually-cost>.

⁵⁷ Donald H. Rumsfeld, *The Annual Report to the President and the Congress* (Washington, D.C.: Department of Defense, 2002), pp. 83-88, available at https://history.defense.gov/Portals/70/Documents/annual_reports/2002_DoD_AR.pdf?ver=2014-06-24-153732-117.

- There is a need for a “secure reserve force.”⁵⁸

The exact Reagan language would need updating because it assumes capabilities that no longer exist (e.g., dual capability—combining nuclear and conventional warheads—has been nearly eliminated.) However, the concepts that underlie the Reagan guidance are still generally relevant.

Current U.S. nuclear forces cannot possibly win a nuclear war against a peer competitor much less two. However, U.S. nuclear employment guidance should not reinforce the current “no win” warfare mentality that exists in Washington (and adversary perceptions of it) which is resulting in defeat after defeat. U.S. adversaries should be made to believe that if they start a nuclear war, they just might lose. The unclassified employment report language is declaratory policy and it should be designed to influence adversary thinking. U.S. adversaries cannot ignore what it says.

As Admiral Richard and Robert Peters of the Heritage Foundation have pointed out, “Decisive victory ultimately deters a future war by changing the conditions that allowed a revisionist power to pursue conflict in the first place....In almost all cases, decisive victory takes the form of a new, better status quo post bellum that is based on a new power and political relationship between the victor and the vanquished.”⁵⁹

The Reagan Administration’s requirement that U.S. nuclear forces “must hold at risk the full range of enemy military capabilities that threaten the United States and its Allies” is significant. The Biden nuclear employment guidance report did not even mention dealing with chemical or biological weapons threats and other catastrophic threats. The need to deter these threats was a major element in the 2020 Trump nuclear employment guidance report.⁶⁰ These omissions should be addressed in the second Trump Administration.

The concept of a secure nuclear reserve force seems to have fallen out of U.S. planning. Yet, it is a key element in dealing with multiple nuclear-armed adversaries and should be reexamined.

The probability that nuclear attacks against the United States will be conducted consistent with the law of armed conflict is almost certainly zero. Exhibit one — President Putin’s war against Ukraine. Moreover, Russia has a very high-yield nuclear system called the Poseidon whose mission is the mass destruction of cities and civilians by massive blast and fallout.⁶¹

⁵⁸ Ronald Reagan, “NUCLEAR WEAPONS EMPLOYMENT POLICY,” NATIONAL SECURITY DECISION DIRECTIVE NUMBER 13, The White House, no date, available at <https://www.reaganlibrary.gov/public/archives/reference/scanned-nsdds/nsdd13.pdf>.

⁵⁹ Admiral Charles Richard, USN (Ret.) and Robert Peters, “On Victory and the Search for a Status Quo Ante Bellum,” *Information Series*, No. 603 (Fairfax, VA: National Institute Press, October 24, 2024), available at https://nipp.org/information_series/admiral-charles-richard-usn-ret-and-robert-peters-on-victory-and-the-search-for-a-status-quo-ante-bellum-no-603-october-24-2024/.

⁶⁰ “Report on the Nuclear Employment Strategy of the United States—2020,” op. cit., p. 8.

⁶¹ Pavel Felgenhauer, “Russia Leaks Data About Domsday Underwater Nuclear Drone,” *Eurasia Daily Monitor* Volume: 12 Issue: 206, November 12, 2015, available at <https://jamestown.org/program/russia-leaks-data-about-domsday-underwater-nuclear-drone/>.

There is a fundamental right under international law of “belligerent reprisal.” Indeed, “Belligerent reprisals have been employed on the battlefield for centuries and are one of the few available sanctions of the laws of war.”⁶² The nuclear-armed dictators must be made to believe that there will be the most serious consequences if they launch high-yield nuclear attacks against American cities with genocidal intent.

The Russian Reaction to the New Nuclear Employment Guidance

The Russians appeared to be unimpressed by the Biden Administration’s nuclear weapons employment guidance report. State-run *TASS* paid little attention to the story. The report by state-run *RT* focused mainly on the Biden Administration’s announcement that with regard to nuclear forces it would continue to comply with the New START Treaty.⁶³ Russian state media didn’t even bother to attack it.

The Biden Administration’s Employment Guidance as a Constraint On President Trump

Mount and Kristensen stated that, “When Donald Trump again takes custody of the nuclear codes in January, he will find no new guardrails on his ability to order use of U.S. nuclear weapons.”⁶⁴ While this appears in part to be a political attack on President Trump, he can sweep away any or all Biden executive orders on day one of his new Administration.

Suggested Near-Term Decisions on Nuclear Deterrence

In light of the multiple serious crisis situations the United States now faces, the following actions should be taken:

- 1) Re-issue the Trump Administration’s 2020 unclassified Nuclear Employment Strategy report updated with the better elements of the Biden Administration’s 2024 unclassified guidance report (e.g., the scope of the nuclear threat and the need to deter multiple adversaries simultaneously).
- 2) Initiate a detailed review of the new classified Nuclear Weapons Employment Guidance, removing any imprudent, ill-advised elements.
- 3) Initiate a review of U.S. nuclear intelligence assessments of Russia, North Korea, Iran and, particularly, China. The Intelligence Community is probably underestimating all of their nuclear capabilities.

⁶² Shane Darcy, “THE EVOLUTION OF THE LAW OF BELLIGERENT REPRISALS,” *MILITARY LAW REVIEW*, Vol. 175, available at file:///C:/Users/aner/Downloads/444497-1.pdf.

⁶³ “Pentagon advises US Congress to abide by key nuclear arms control treaty,” *RT*, November 17, 2024, available at <https://www.rt.com/news/607771-us-pentagon-report-nuclear-treaty-russia/>.

⁶⁴ Mount and Kristensen, “Biden Nuclear Weapons Employment Guidance Leaves Nuclear Decisions to Trump,” op. cit.

- 4) Declare a material breach of the New START Treaty and begin an immediate upload of American strategic nuclear forces. In the current crises, such decisive action may just prevent World War III. It would cost very little⁶⁵ and it is the only step that the United States can undertake in the short-term.
- 5) Initiate a comprehensive Nuclear Posture Review. Just the increase in Chinese nuclear capability justifies this task.

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⁶⁵ Ibid.: "The Potential Costs of Expanding U.S. Strategic Nuclear Forces If the New START Treaty Expires," Congressional Budget Office, August 2020, available at <https://www.cbo.gov/publication/56524>.