

Opinion

Nuclear weapons and the next United States president

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For citizens of the Netherlands and Europeans more broadly, the 2016 US presidential election is proving to be one of the more interesting and unnerving elections in recent memory. On the one hand, Hillary Clinton has a long history in politics and is tied to more scandals than any presidential candidate in living memory. Even within her own party a majority of likely voters do not believe she is trustworthy. On the other hand, Donald Trump is perhaps the most bombastic presidential candidate ever to win the nomination of a major political party. His willingness to offend virtually every group possible is seemingly limitless. However, it is the flaws of the two candidates that are perhaps what makes the 2016 presidential election so interesting and so disconcerting for those around the world intently awaiting its outcome.

For Europeans concerned about the election's outcome, two security related questions are of principle concern. First, will the next president continue to support a strong role for the United States in NATO? Second, what might American nuclear deterrence strategy and policy look like in a new administration? Before turning our focus to the second question it is important to first look back at recent American nuclear weapons policy.

President Obama's Prague agenda: then and now

In April 2009, while standing before the world in Prague, Czech Republic, President Barack Obama outlined his goal for a world free of nuclear weapons. He also stated that the United States will continue to maintain a safe, secure, and effective arsenal as long as nuclear weapons exist. Although he clearly described his intentions to reduce the role of nuclear weapons in national security, President Obama reiterated the fact that the United States will continue to assure allies that the United States remains committed to its role in providing extended deterrence.

He went on to successfully negotiate the New START Treaty between Russia and the United States, reducing the operationally deployed nuclear arsenals of both countries by approximately twenty percent. He further stated that his administration is prepared for additional stockpile reductions. However, Obama's support for substantial nuclear modernization programs, which was central to garnering Republican support for New START ratification in the US Senate, was, and remains, a point of contention for advocates of nuclear disarmament.

While it is easy for many of the United States' NATO allies to criticize the US for its continued reliance on nuclear weapons for security, it is worth remembering that a number of non-nuclear allies of the United States have publicly or privately warned the current administration that they will pursue an independent nuclear weapons program if they view American capability and will as no longer credible. During the Cold War, the United States' security commitment was vital for protection against Soviet threats. In the twenty-first century, the strategic environment is far more complex and unstable, which makes it far

more difficult for the United States to effectively manage the threats facing the United States and NATO.

In offering a “nuclear umbrella” to the member states of NATO, the United States is assuring its allies that it will maintain the requisite capabilities required to deter the likes of Vladimir Putin and any other potential adversary of NATO. While the recent Warsaw Summit resulted in a continued commitment to a NATO nuclear capability, the next president of the United States will face a NATO nuclear capability that is the smallest, oldest, and least capable of any in NATO history. And while some NATO member states refuse to call Russia an adversary and view the NATO nuclear capability as a “political weapon,” the reality of the current situation is that President Putin views NATO as weak and easily divided.

The November election

With Election Day in the United States set for the first Tuesday after the first Monday in November, significant attention has been given to each candidate with regard to their understanding and commitment to the nuclear enterprise. Hillary Clinton, the former Secretary of State under President Obama, understands the extended deterrence policies of the United States and deterrence principles in general. She explained to a campaign audience in New Hampshire that North Korea realizes that by having a nuclear weapon any use of that weapon would invoke a massive retaliation.

Although Donald Trump lacks political experience, he has demonstrated a basic understanding of deterrence. Trump continues to stand by his statements that he will not take nuclear use “off the table.” Should ISIS obtain a nuclear weapon and use it against the United States or an ally, Trump has stated that he values having the option to use nuclear weapons in response. Furthermore, in one interview he stated that an adversary must believe that the United States will actually use a nuclear weapon — demonstrating that the will to use them is at the heart of nuclear deterrence.

If capability plus will equal credibility, then a capable nuclear force makes up the second part of the nuclear deterrence equation. Clinton largely supports a nuclear modernization policy that is similar to that of the Obama administration. She has openly stated that she will continue to work stockpile reduction efforts and nuclear terrorism-issues she was involved with as Secretary of State. However, she deviates from President Obama on nuclear modernization. When asked about her view on the current nuclear modernization program Clinton responded that she is aware of the program and would have to look into it because it did not make sense to her.

Donald Trump on the other hand has not provided a clearly defined viewpoint on the current modernization program, but he has broadly stated that he supports a strong military and a capable nuclear arsenal. In one interview, Trump stated that he would build conventional forces and capabilities to a point where the United States would not have to contemplate nuclear weapons use. It was also reported that in a closed door session with foreign policy experts, Trump repeatedly asked why nuclear weapons could not be used for reasons other than in a response to a nuclear attack on the United States or its allies.

The candidates differ significantly in their view on nuclear proliferation. Neither Clinton nor Trump are in favor of proliferation, but Trump is open to the idea of countries, such as NATO member-states, developing their own nuclear arsenals. If the United States' arsenal undergoes further reductions, the United States will face growing skepticism by allies as the credibility of US extended deterrence declines. Trump not only holds to the notion that the United States must be paid for the security guarantee provided, but it is not necessarily bad if a country wants their own nuclear weapons. In fact, the philosophy that increased regional stability can come from proliferation is supported by strategic deterrence thinkers such as Kenneth Waltz, with the Cold War and the India-Pakistan stalemate serving as examples of this view.

Both presidential candidates have made statements that indicate they would use a nuclear weapon if the situation requires. Particularly with Iran, Clinton told interviewers that if Iran were to attack Israel with a nuclear weapon, the United States would respond in kind. Defending himself to interviewers, Trump asked why the United States would not want to retaliate with nuclear weapons if terrorists, such as ISIS, were to attack the United States with a nuclear weapon. It does appear that Donald Trump is receiving the harshest criticism for his public and provide statements related to the nuclear enterprise.

With nuclear weapons available for use, the question remains as to whether nuclear weapons can be used responsibly. To answer Trump's question, the US military and strategic thinkers have given considerable thought to limited nuclear war and escalation control. In fact the United States uses them every day. Strategic deterrent effects from nuclear weapons, both for the United States homeland and its allies, have eliminated major power wars for more than seventy years. Nuclear yields are being reduced and contrary to nuclear abolitionist propaganda, nuclear weapons are neither on hair-trigger alert nor are they susceptible to accidental launch.

The next administration

Rather than listening to much of the rhetoric coming from Washington, DC, the next president should take a bold approach to the United States' nuclear weapons and delivery vehicles. Maintaining technical superiority is a must. Trying to deter or fight and win a nuclear conflict with aging weapon systems and unsupportable components is unwise and goes against much of what we know about geopolitics and strategic stability. Russia and China are aggressively modernizing their weapon systems. Furthermore, the next president should remove the current restrictions on national laboratories — freeing them to design new warheads. The weapons laboratories can produce new warhead designs that produce less radiation and fallout while providing the desired weapon effects. Removing self-imposed restrictions could lead to safer designs with even lower yields.

In addition, the next president could continue arms control agreements with Russia, but should only do so through a multilateral framework that includes other key nuclear powers. With further reductions in the stockpile likely to encourage nuclear proliferation, focusing on the credibility of US extended deterrence is critical — a point advocates of arms control should understand.

The United States must never adopt a “no first use” policy, but should maintain a preemptive strike option. Although the United States has moved on from the Cold War, Russia is reviving an adversarial relationship. Eliminating a preemptive strike option, in light of aging nuclear weapon systems, will certainly be seen as a sign of weakness. This view would not be held by Russia alone, but also by our allies. According to *The Daily Caller*, intelligence reports suggest that Russia may be developing new strategies for employing nuclear weapons when faced with a superior conventional force or a coalition, and has started to increase its training for the military in nuclear warfare.

The United States’ nuclear enterprise is at a crossroads. The next president will determine which direction the country will take. For the sake of the United States’ allies, the next president should take a bold pro-nuclear stance and seek to increase the credibility of the arsenal by improving the capability and will of the United States.

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