

Trump Tweet Could Signal Dangerous Nuclear Policy Shift

Authored by Daryl Kimball and Kingston Reif on Thu, 2016-12-22 18:14

Today president-elect Donald Trump used his ever-active Twitter feed to say: “The United States must greatly strengthen and expand its nuclear capability until such time as the world comes to its senses regarding nukes.”

As with most 140-character Trump pronouncements, deciphering its actual meaning and intent can be a difficult task.



Trump's comments today might simply be an expression of support for current U.S. efforts to maintain, upgrade, and replace U.S. nuclear forces, the price of which is likely to exceed \$1 trillion over the next 30 years. On the campaign trail, Trump expressed concern that the United States was falling behind and expressed support for investing in U.S. nuclear weapons programs.

Trump met yesterday with a number of high-ranking military officials at his Mar-a-Lago estate in Palm Beach Florida. A variety of defense topics were reportedly discussed, including nuclear weapons policy.

Alternatively, Trump might be signaling his support for expanding the number of nuclear weapons in the U.S. nuclear inventory, building new types of nuclear weapons, and/or increasing the role nuclear weapons play in U.S. policy. If Trump intends to expand the size or the capabilities of the U.S. arsenal, which is already excessive, it would constitute a radical departure from U.S. policy and would accelerate and worsen global nuclear competition and the risk of war.

Since the end of the Cold War the United States has drastically reduced the size of its nuclear arsenal. In fact, Republican presidents have reduced the arsenal far more aggressively than their Democratic counterparts.

Under the Obama administration, U.S. policy has been not to develop new types of nuclear warheads or modify existing warheads to create new military capabilities because there is no need to expand the role and number of nuclear weapons and no military requirement for new nuclear weapons. The United States currently [maintains](#) an arsenal of roughly 4,600 nuclear warheads, 900 of which can be fired within minutes of a decision to do so.

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In fact the Pentagon and President Obama [determined in 2013](#) that the United States has up to one-third more deployed nuclear weapons than necessary to meet nuclear deterrence requirements. A reduction to 1,100 deployed strategic weapons would still leave more than enough weapons to produce catastrophic devastation to any country that considers attacking the United States or our allies with nuclear weapons.

Also, there is little room in the federal budget to “expand” the scope and the cost of U.S. nuclear weapons “modernization” programs. The United States is already pursuing an ambitious plan to upgrade and replace all three legs of the nuclear triad — at a pace that when coupled with maintaining the existing forces will cost the taxpayer over \$1 trillion over the next 30 years. That plan is already unnecessary and unsustainable without a further “expansion.”

Twitter is hardly the right medium for communicating changes in U.S. nuclear policy. Trump’s cryptic pronouncements suggest a radical shift in U.S. policy that could accelerate global nuclear tensions and complicate the job of stopping the spread of nuclear weapons.

Rather than “expand” the U.S. nuclear arsenal and its capabilities, Trump should maintain the previous bipartisan policy of engaging with Russia to cap and reduce the two nations’ still enormous, costly, and deadly nuclear arsenals, reduce nuclear tensions, strengthen the global nuclear nonproliferation system, and bring the world closer to the peace and security of a world without nuclear weapons.

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