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President Trump: Successor to the Nuclear Throne

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Introduction

Donald Trump's arrival in the White House as US President has deeply unnerved people from across the political spectrum, both inside the US and around the world. The fact that many regard Trump as an indecent individual and his government as potentially the number one threat to their dignity, liberty and life means that the civil strife already raging in the US is unlikely to fade away soon. The wide-ranging implications of Trump's election to the most powerful office on Earth—for the peace and stability of both that nation and the world—cannot be emphasised enough. In this regard, of the many uncertainties and worries brought on by a Trump presidency, the two existential questions of climate change and nuclear war stand out.

With the former, Trump's recent [comment](#) that he now has an 'open mind' about the importance of the Paris climate agreement—having previously said climate change is a 'hoax'—is unlikely to assuage fears that he will seek to dramatically expand the US's extraction and reliance on fossil fuels. With the latter, strong doubts have been raised over whether the new President is capable of responsibly handling the incredible power that will be at his fingertips. Moreover, several commentators are already raising concerns that a Trump administration will pursue policies that will aggravate and disappoint his supporters, a situation that could increase the possibility of the US engaging in a 'diversionary' war.

In order to consider what we can expect from a Trump presidency, as well as noting whom Trump empowers as members of his cabinet and those whom he draws on for advice, it is vital to study the track record of recent administrations and appreciate the powers Trump will inherit. In doing so this briefing focuses on the question of what a Trump presidency might mean for international relations with a focus on nuclear arms, including doctrine and disarmament. This means reviewing policies relevant to the US's nuclear arsenal and pressing international challenges such as non-proliferation, including in East Asia and the Middle East, as well as the US's relationship with Russia and its role in NATO.

The power and responsibilities of the nuclear monarch

Since the dawn of the nuclear age, all US Presidents have been solely responsible for the decision to use the near-unimaginably destructive power of the nation's nuclear arsenal. Thus, as Bruce Blair—a former intercontinental ballistic missile launch control officer—makes [clear](#), 'Trump will have the sole authority to launch nuclear weapons whenever he chooses with a single phone call.' The wider political meaning of the bomb for the world

is aptly [summarised](#) by Daniel Deudney, who describes nuclear weapons as ‘intrinsically despotic’ so that they have created ‘nuclear monarchies’ in all nuclear-armed states. Deudney identifies three related reasons for this development: ‘the speed of nuclear use decisions; the concentration of nuclear use decision into the hands of one individual; and the lack of accountability stemming from the inability of affected groups to have their interests represented at the moment of nuclear use’.

Similarly, Elaine Scarry has [explained](#) in stark terms in her 2014 book *Thermonuclear Monarchy: Choosing between Democracy and Doom*, how the possession of nuclear weapons has converted the US government into ‘a monarchic form of rule that places all defense in the executive branch of government’ leaving the population ‘incapacitated’. In response to this situation, Scarry argues that the American people must use the Constitution as a tool to dismantle the US nuclear weapons system, thereby revitalising democratic participation and control over decision-making. Scarry also outlines the incredible might the president wields, with each of the US’s fourteen nuclear-armed submarines alone carrying ‘enough power to destroy the people of an entire continent’, equivalent to ‘eight times the full-blast power expended by Allied and Axis countries in World War II’. Nuclear specialist Hans Kristensen has [described](#) how the US’s strategic nuclear war plan ‘if unleashed in its full capacity’ could ‘kill hundreds of millions of people, devastate entire nations, and cause climatic effects on a global scale’.

This war plan consists of a ‘family of plans’ that is aimed at ‘six potential adversaries’ whose identities are kept secret. Kristensen understands that they include ‘potentially hostile countries with nuclear, chemical, and biological weapons (WMD)’, meaning China, North Korea, Iran, Russia and Syria as well as a terrorist group backed by a state that has conducted a catastrophic WMD attack. The ‘dominant mission’ for US nuclear weapons within these plans is termed *counterforce*, meaning strikes on ‘military, mostly nuclear, targets and the enemy’s leadership’.

Despite these plans, the US’s nuclear arsenal is often described by mainstream commentators as being solely intended to ensure mutual assured destruction (MAD), i.e. as part of the ‘balance of terror’ with Russia, in order to prevent armed conflict between the two nations and to ensure a response in kind to a surprise nuclear attack. However, as Joseph Gerson and John Feffer [explain](#), rather than deterrence just being about enough nuclear forces surviving a surprise first strike attack to ensure MAD, US military planners have also understood it to mean ‘preventing other nations from taking “courses of action” that are inimical to US interests’.

David McDonough thus [describes](#) the ‘long-standing goal of American nuclear war-planners’ as being the achievement of the ability to launch a disarming first-strike against an opponent- otherwise known as nuclear superiority. This has been magnified in recent years as the US seeks to ‘prevent’ or ‘rollback’ the ability of weaker states—both nuclear and non-nuclear powers—to establish or maintain a deterrence relationship. Taking all this into account, the new commander-in-chief’s apparently volatile temperament thus raises deep concerns since his finger will be on the nuclear trigger as soon as he assumes office on 20th January 2017. Given his past experience, Bruce Blair’s [statement](#) that he is ‘scared to death’ by the idea of a Trump presidency is but one further reason why urgent discussion and action, both in the US and globally, on lessening nuclear dangers—and reviving disarmament—is vital. A recent [report](#) by the Ploughshares Fund on how the US can reduce its nuclear spending, reform its nuclear posture and restrain its nuclear war plans should thus be required reading in Washington.

However, as the Economist has rightly [noted](#), ‘It is not Mr Trump’s fault that the system, in which the vulnerable land-based missile force is kept on hair-trigger alert, is widely held to be inherently dangerous’ since, as they point out, ‘no former president, including Barack Obama, has done anything to change it.’ Over sixty years after the nuclear attacks on Hiroshima and Nagasaki, nuclearism thus remains very much embedded in the nation’s strategic thinking. Yet the election of Obama, and the rhetoric of his 2009 [Prague speech](#), in which he stated ‘America’s commitment to seek the peace and security of a world without nuclear weapons’ led many to think that a real change was on the cards.

Obama’s visit to Hiroshima earlier this year to commemorate the bombings was thus a painful reminder of how wide the gap is between the [rearmament](#) programmes that the US and other nuclear weapon states are engaged in and the disarmament action that they are legally obliged to pursue under the nuclear non-proliferation treaty (NPT). Obama himself [said](#) in Japan that, ‘technological progress without an equivalent progress in human institutions can doom us. The scientific revolution that led to the splitting of an atom requires a moral revolution as well.’ For this statement to be meaningful it is necessary to identify who is responsible for the existing, highly dangerous state of affairs. In short, the US government’s recent record supports Scarry’s suggestion that a democratic revolution is what, in reality, is most needed if the US is to make substantial progress on nuclear non-proliferation and disarmament. Short-term reforms towards the democratic control and ultimate dismantlement of the US’s nuclear arsenal have been [outlined](#) by Kennette Benedict, who writes that the next administration should:

place our nuclear weapons on a much lower level of launch readiness, release to the public more information about the nuclear weapons in our own arsenals, include legislators and outside experts in its nuclear posture review and recognize Congress’ authority to declare war as a prerequisite to any use of nuclear weapons.

Assessing Obama’s nuclear legacy

In order to properly appreciate what a Trump presidency may bring, we need to revisit the range and types of powers bequeathed to the commander-in-chief by previous administrations. Despite the military advances made by China and Russia in recent years, it is important to recognise that the US remains far and away the biggest global spender on conventional and nuclear weapons and plans to consolidate this position by maintaining significant technological superiority over its adversaries, which will, as is well appreciated, push Beijing, Moscow—and thus other regional powers—to respond. Yet spending on nuclear weapons alone is set to pose significant budgeting [difficulties](#) for future US governments.

According to a 2014 [report](#) by the James Martin Center, the Departments of Defense and Energy plan to spend approximately \$1 trillion over the next 30 years ‘to maintain its current nuclear arsenal and procure a new generation of nuclear-armed or nuclear capable bombers and submarines’ as well as new submarine launched ballistic missiles (SLBMs) and inter-continental ballistic missiles (ICBMs). Arms Control Today has [found](#) that total Defense Department nuclear spending ‘is projected to average more than \$40 billion in constant fiscal year 2016 dollars between 2025 and 2035, when modernization costs are expected to peak’. Including costs for the Department of Energy’s National Nuclear Security Administration’s projected weapons-related spending

during this period ‘would push average spending during this period to more than \$50 billion per year’. If anywhere near these sums are spent, then the modest reductions to the US’s nuclear stockpile achieved during the Obama presidency will be entirely overshadowed. Moreover, as analyst Andrew Lichterman [notes](#), the US’s continued modernisation of its nuclear forces is ‘inherently incompatible’ with the ‘unequivocal undertaking’ given at the 2000 NPT Review Conference to eliminate its nuclear arsenal and apply the ‘principle of irreversibility’ to this and related actions.

For Lichterman, the huge outlays committed to the nuclear weapons complex were part of a political ‘bargain’ made by the Obama administration with Republicans. This ensured that the New START nuclear arms control treaty would pass in the Senate whilst also not disturbing the development of missile defense and other advanced conventional weapons programmes. New START is a bilateral agreement between Russia and the US, which Steven Pifer [describes](#) as ‘one of the few bright spots’ that exists in these nations’ relationship. Under the treaty Moscow and Washington must, by 2018, reduce their stockpile of operationally deployed strategic nuclear warheads to 1,550. Furthermore, both must keep to a limit of 700 deployed strategic launchers (missiles) and heavy bombers, and to a combined limit of 800 deployed and non-deployed strategic launchers and heavy bombers.

Despite New START ‘proceeding smoothly’ according to Pifer, Hans Kristensen [recently](#) produced a report comparing Obama’s record with that of the previous presidents holding office during the nuclear age, which found that, hitherto, Obama has cut fewer warheads—in terms of numbers rather than percentages—than ‘any administration ever’ and that ‘the biggest nuclear disarmers’ in recent decades have been Republicans, not Democrats. Kristensen thus drily [observes](#) of this situation that,

a conservative Congress does not complain when Republican presidents reduce the stockpile, only when Democratic president try to do so. As a result of the opposition, the United States is now stuck with a larger and more expensive nuclear arsenal than had Congress agreed to significant reductions.

As his presidency draws to a close, presumably as a means of securing some sort of meaningful legacy in this area, it has been reported that Obama considered adopting a no first use (NFU) policy for nuclear weapons, something which, whilst reversible, could act as a restraint on future presidents. Yet this was apparently abandoned, [according](#) to the New York Times, after ‘top national security advisers argued that it could undermine allies and embolden Russia and China’. Furthermore, according to [Josh Rogin](#) of the Washington Post, the governments of Japan, South Korea, France and Britain all privately communicated their concerns about Washington adopting NFU. Defense Secretary Ashton Carter is also said to have argued that such a move would be unwise because ‘if North Korea used biological weapons against the South the United States might need the option of threatening a nuclear response’.

However, as Daryll Kimball [explains](#), the US’s ‘overwhelming’ conventional military advantage means that ‘there is no plausible circumstance that could justify—legally, morally, or militarily—the use of nuclear weapons to deal with a non-nuclear threat’. Such resistance to NFU is thus deeply disappointing given that, as Kimball goes on to note, this move would go some way to reassuring China and Russia about the US’s strategic intentions. It would also be an important confidence-building measure for the wider community of non-nuclear weapon states, showing that the US is willing to act in ‘good faith’ towards its disarmament obligations under the NPT.

Thinking about the causes of proliferation more widely requires us to understand what drives weaker states to seek deterrents, if their reliance on them is to be reduced. For example, as Dr Alan J. Kuperman [observes](#), NATO's bombing and overthrow of Libyan leader Muammar Gaddafi in 2011 'greatly complicated the task of persuading other states such as Iran and North Korea 'to halt or reverse their nuclear programs'. The lesson Tehran and Pyongyang took is thus that because Gaddafi had voluntarily ended his nuclear and chemical weapons programmes, the West now felt free to pursue regime change. When assessing the importance of the Iran nuclear deal, which is often hailed as one of Obama's landmark achievements, and which the next President must not be allowed to [derail](#), it is thus important also to consider carefully what behaviour by the most powerful states will enable existing or potential nuclear possessors to embrace disarmament and reduce their interest in seeking non-conventional deterrents.

The inability of Washington to make substantial progress towards reducing the salience of nuclear weapons at home and abroad is all the more noteworthy when one considers the state of US and Russian public opinion on nuclear arms control and disarmament. As John Steinbrunner and Nancy Gallagher [observe](#), 'responses to detailed questions reveal a striking disparity between what U.S. and Russian leaders are doing and what their publics desire'. For example, their polling found that:

At the most fundamental level, the vast majority of Americans and Russians think that nuclear weapons have a very limited role in current security circumstances and believe that their only legitimate purpose is to deter nuclear attack. It is highly consistent, then, that the publics in both countries would favor eliminating all nuclear weapons if this action could be taken under effective international verification.

Another important measure which the US has failed to hitherto ratify is the Comprehensive Test Ban Treaty (CTBT). This is despite President Obama stating in 2009 that he [intended](#) to pursue Senate ratification of the treaty 'immediately and aggressively'. Once more, there is notably strong public support—82% [according](#) to a 2010 poll by the Chicago Council on Global Affairs—for the US joining the CTBT but, again, the Republican-controlled Senate has [blocked](#) the treaty at every opportunity.

Overall, the gap between the public's will and the government's inaction on nuclear issues is alarming and redolent of the wider democratic deficit in the US. On a more positive note, the fact that the citizenry supports such measures suggests that groups advocating arms control and disarmament initiatives should continue to engage with and understand the public's positions in order to effectively harness their support.

Stepping back from the brink

In terms of priorities for the incoming administration in the US, stepping back from military confrontation with Russia and pushing the threat of nuclear war to the margins must be at the top of the list. Whilst much has been made of a potential rapprochement between Trump and Putin, the two have, [reportedly](#), only just spoken for the first time on the phone and still need to actually meet in person to discuss strategic issues and deal with inevitable international events and crises, including in relation to Ukraine and Syria. As of now, whilst the mood music from both sides might suggest a warming of relations, as has been seen with previous administrations, unless cooperation is rooted in a real willingness to resolve problems (which for Russia includes US ballistic missile defense deployments in Eastern Europe and NATO expansion) then tensions can quickly re-

emerge. Another related question concerns how Trump will conduct himself during any potential crisis or conflict with Russia or another major power, given the stakes and risks involved, as highlighted above.

Whilst we must wait to find out precisely what the new administration's approach to international affairs will be, in the past week, NATO's Secretary General Jens Stoltenberg [told](#) the BBC that he had been personally informed by Donald Trump, following the election, that the US remains 'strongly committed to NATO, and that the security guarantees to Europe stand'. Trump had previously shaken sections of the defence and foreign policy establishment by [suggesting](#) that NATO was 'obsolete' and that countries such as Japan (and by extension others such as South Korea and Saudi Arabia) 'have to pay us or we have to let them protect themselves', which could include them acquiring the bomb. One reason why some in Washington have, in the past, not wanted their regional allies to develop their own nuclear weapons is because the US might then become dragged into an escalating conflict. Moreover, if an ally in one region seeks the bomb, this may cause others elsewhere to pursue their own capabilities- an act of strategic independence that might make these states harder to influence and control.

The US's key relationships in East Asia and the Middle East illustrate why, if a future US President wishes to take meaningful moves towards a world free of nuclear weapons, then developing alternative regional political agreements, including strategic cooperation with China and Russia, will be necessary. As Nancy Gallagher rightly [notes](#), the 'weaknesses of existing international organizations' thus requires 'more inclusive, cooperative security institutions' to be constructed regionally 'to complement and someday, perhaps, to replace exclusive military alliances', alongside progressive demilitarisation. Such confidence-building measures would also support efforts to halt missile and nuclear tests by states such as North Korea, which may soon be [capable](#) of striking the US mainland.

Imagining the next enemy

As well as mapping out the US's current nuclear weapons policies and its regional relationships, it is important to reflect upon how domestic political dynamics under a Trump presidency might drive Washington's behaviour internationally, particularly given the nuclear shadow that always hangs over conflicts involving the US.

For example, in the near-term, Trump's economic plan and the great expectations amongst the American working class that have been generated, may have particularly dangerous consequences if, as seems likely, the primary beneficiaries are the very wealthy. Reviewing Trump's economic plans, Martin Wolf of the *Financial Times* [concludes](#) that 'the longer-term consequences are likely to be grim, not least for his angry, but fooled, supporters. Next time, they might be even angrier. Where that might lead is terrifying'. Gillian Tett has also [highlighted](#) the 'real risks' that Trump's policies could 'spark US social unrest or geopolitical uncertainty'. Elsewhere, George Monbiot in the *Guardian*, makes the stark [assertion](#) that the inability of the US and other governments to respond effectively to public anger means he now believes that 'we will see war between the major powers within my lifetime'.

If these warnings weren't troubling enough, no less a figure than Henry Kissinger [argued](#) on BBC's Newsnight that 'the more likely reaction' to a Trump presidency from terror groups 'will be to do something that evokes a reaction' from Washington in order to 'widen the split' between it and Europe and damage the US's image around the world. Given that Trump has already vowed to 'bomb the shit out of ISIS' and [refused](#) to rule out

the use of nuclear weapons against the group, it goes without saying that such a scenario could have the gravest consequences and must be avoided so that the US does not play into the terrorists' hands.

Looking more widely, President-elect Trump's existing and potential cabinet appointments, which Glenn Greenwald has [summarised](#) as 'empowering...by and large...the traditional, hard, hawkish right-wing members of the Republican Party' also point to the US engaging in future overseas conflicts, rather than the isolationism which many in the foreign policy establishment criticised Trump for [proposing](#) during the presidential campaign. William Hartung and Todd Harrison have drawn [attention](#) to the fact that defence spending under Trump could be almost \$1trillion (spread over ten years) more than Obama's most recent budget request. Such projections, alongside Trump's election [rhetoric](#), suggest that the new nuclear monarch will try to push wide open the door to more spending on nuclear weapons and missile defense, a situation made possible, as we have seen, by Obama's inability to implement progressive change in this area at a time of persistent Republican obstruction.

Conclusion

The problem now, for the US and the world, is that if Trump does make good on his campaign promises then this will have several damaging consequences for international peace and security and that if Trump does not sufficiently satisfy his supporters then this will likely pour fuel on the flames at home, which may then quickly spread abroad. The people of the US and the world thus now have a huge responsibility to act as a restraining influence and ensure that the US retains an accountable, transparent and democratic government. This responsibility will only grow if crises or shocks take place in or outside the US which ambitious and extremist figures take advantage of, framing them as threats to national security in order to protect their interests and power. If such scenarios emerge the next administration and its untried and untested President will find themselves with a range of extremely powerful tools and institutional experience at their disposal, including nuclear weapons, which may prove too tempting to resist when figuring out how to respond to widespread anger, confusion and unrest, both at home and abroad.

If we want to look for evidence supporting a belief in more hopeful possible outcomes, we may recall that during the election campaign, Trump had [said](#), on the highly controversial topic of immigration, that 'everything is negotiable'. The next President's opportunistic and transactional approach and the potential for a new opening with Russia could thus still provide a way of stepping back from the brink. Yet any warming of relations between the US and other major powers must go hand-in-hand with significant restraint when it comes to conventional and nuclear weapons policy to properly signal a shift away from offensive unilateralism and towards common security.

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