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President Trump Must Put the Nuclear Enterprise on a Wartime Footing

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KEY TAKEAWAYS

The United States must have a larger and more diverse 21st-century nuclear deterrent given the nature and composition of modern enemies' nuclear threats.

The incoming administration should not tolerate the continued failure to build the nuclear weapons that are the ultimate backstop of American security.

The President, the U.S. Secretary of Energy, and the NNSA Administrator can help complete the mission of stockpile stewardship and modernization.

The United States is currently modernizing and replacing its nuclear deterrent, to include the nuclear weapons themselves, all of which are relics of the Cold War. The modernization process is moving too slowly. Further, the current nuclear modernization program of record is necessary, but insufficient, to deal with the threats that face the U.S.[1]

While it made sense in 2010—an era in which it seemed nuclear-power nations would cooperate to combat nuclear terrorism and negotiate their way to ever lower numbers of deployed nuclear weapons—simply to replace the remaining Cold War nuclear weapons with the same number of the same types of weapons, the world of 2010 is gone. America's adversaries in Beijing and Pyongyang are building nuclear weapons as fast as they can.[2] Iran is on the cusp of

becoming a nuclear weapons state.[3] Russia issues nuclear threats to the United States and its allies on a near-monthly basis.[4]

The nuclear modernization program that President Barack Obama began in 2010 is insufficient to deter the authoritarians of today.[5] The United States must have a larger and more diverse nuclear deterrent of the 21st century, given the nature and composition of modern enemies' nuclear threats.[6] Indeed, America's nuclear enterprise is failing to produce the new, fully constituted warheads (defined as new warheads with associated plutonium pits) needed for the 2010 modernization program—much less build the nuclear arsenal of the 21st century that the United States needs to deter its adversaries from carrying out a strategic attack on the American Homeland or that of its allies.

That must change in the upcoming Trump Administration. The incoming administration should not tolerate continued failure within the government agencies whose mission it is to build the nuclear weapons that are the ultimate backstop of American security.

A History Lesson

America's nuclear enterprise did not always fail at its mission. In 1951, the U.S. government acquired land in Rocky Flats, Colorado, to produce plutonium and other nuclear weapons components. Eighteen months after breaking ground, Rocky Flats produced the first nuclear weapons components.[7] From 1952 to 1957, the United States built five operational nuclear reactors, two large nuclear material reprocessing facilities, and a tritium separation plant across the country to support tritium and plutonium production for the nuclear weapons complex.[8]

By 1962, the U.S. was producing more than 6,000 nuclear warheads a year.[9] In short, 70 years ago, the United States went from having a bespoke nuclear weapons production capability to one that was on an industrial scale, all in a little over a decade. In comparison, as of the fall of 2024, the United States has built roughly a dozen new plutonium pits and no new fully constituted nuclear warheads—despite being in year 14 of a nuclear modernization program that began in 2010.[10]

According to the original plan drafted in the Obama Administration, the United States should have been able to produce 80 plutonium pits—the key material in a nuclear weapons—each year by the mid-2020s. Some government offices now estimate that it will be 2030 before the United States is able to build 80 pits a year.[11] Others, such as the current National Nuclear Security Administration (NNSA) chief, suggest it will be 2035.[12] Or it could be even later.

The reality is that the United States does not have the sustained nuclear-warhead manufacturing capability that it needs to credibly deter America's adversaries. Considering that China is building more than 100 new nuclear warheads *each* year, *every* year, the NNSA must do better:[13] It must change its culture and go on a "wartime footing."[14]

Putting the NNSA on a Wartime Footing

A wartime footing means the next Secretary of Energy and the incoming NNSA Administrator must reassess how to interpret safety, security, and environmental regulations. This is not to say that the U.S. Department of Energy should work recklessly or without concern for the environment or safety of the NNSA workforce, but the NNSA has become captive to a work-free "safe zone" mentality.[15]

Onerous regulatory interpretations have created an environment in which little, if any, progress is made in the production of plutonium pits or warheads at scale. In some cases, adherence to safety, security, and environmental regulations has created an environment in which, at best, things are done at a glacial pace—at worst, it has created paralysis. When the only metrics for success are for safety, security, and environmental goals, the mission of producing nuclear weapons becomes secondary.

This must change under the new NNSA Administrator. The NNSA must posture itself to produce at least 80 plutonium pits per year by 2030 and 200 a year by 2035. The U.S. must also recognize that American production capacity for other types of critical materials that go into nuclear weapons, such as tritium, is now insufficient to meet the needs of the forthcoming U.S. nuclear force.

Along with its nuclear weapon development and production infrastructure, the NNSA must maintain the capability to resume underground nuclear explosive testing within six months if called upon to do so. The NNSA must sustain and deliver on time the fully constituted warheads needed to support both strategic and non-strategic nuclear capabilities by building the W93 at scale by fiscal year (FY) 2026; complete the W80-4 Life Extension Project by FY 2031; and explore future ballistic missile warhead requirements based on the threats and vulnerabilities of potential adversaries, including the possibility of common Air Force–Navy reentry systems or requirements for warheads that go on hypersonic cruise missiles.[16]

The United States must field the necessary capability, capacity, and responsiveness of the nuclear weapons infrastructure and support the skills necessary to not only do all of the above, but also be ready to take upwards of 200 W80s and W79s out of the ready reserve stockpile and combine them with existing Tomahawks for Land-Attack and Anti-Ship Missions, Long-Range Anti-Ship Missiles, and Joint Air-to-Surface Standoff Missiles until the United States can build the new fully constituted warheads necessary for the new arsenal.

Culture as Inhibitor to Progress

The next NNSA Administrator must put the agency on a wartime footing. A wartime footing means that the United States will produce nuclear weapons at scale before the end of the 2020s. To do so, the next Secretary of Department of Energy and, perhaps more importantly, the next NNSA Administrator must reassess how to interpret safety, security, and environmental regulations.

This is not to say that the Department of Energy should work recklessly or without concern for the environment or for the safety of the NNSA workforce, but the NNSA has become captive to a work-free "safe and secure zone" mentality. As noted previously, onerous interpretations of regulations have created an environment in which little progress is made in the production of plutonium pits or warheads at scale.

In some cases, adherence to safety, security, and environmental regulations has created an environment in which, at best, things are done at a glacial sluggish pace—and at worst, it has created paralysis. When the only metrics for success are for safety, security, and environmental goals, the mission of producing nuclear weapons becomes secondary.

As a consequence, the United States is accepting greater strategic risk—that is, the risk that the United States will not field the arsenal that is necessary to deter nuclear aggression by its adversaries—in order to reduce the risk of industrial accidents within the nuclear enterprise.

What the Incoming President Should Do

The President and—by delegated authorities—the U.S. Secretary of Energy and the NNSA Administrator can waive or reinterpret regulations that allow a favorable environment for completing the mission of stockpile stewardship and modernization.[17] The mission can be done safely and securely while protecting the environment, *but* achieving the mission must be the highest priority.

The incoming Secretary of Energy and NNSA Administrator must develop expedited timelines for facilities construction and use appropriate contracting vehicles, direct the use of expedited hiring authorities, leverage Defense Production Act–funding to give loans and equipment to contractors, and pay bonuses for expedited performance of construction to accelerate warhead production.[18] And, due to the critical nature of this mission, there must also be penalties for workers and managers—to include civil servants, senior executives, and political appointees—for failing to meet project milestones.

President Donald Trump must also issue an executive order exempting the NNSA from Department of Energy bureaucratic processes and policies below the Secretary level. This will jump-start the production complex, remove unnecessary distractions, and focus resources on building nuclear weapons.

To reiterate, the NNSA should not engage in reckless or unsafe behavior—but it must take necessary prudent steps to balance strategic risk against tactical, industrial risks and move away from the stagnant management policies that have taken a zero-risk tolerance policy toward everything related to the production of nuclear weapons. To ensure that forward progress is being made, the next NNSA Administrator should provide monthly briefings to the President on the status of these efforts.

The next NNSA Administrator should spend at least two days per month at the Savannah River site and an additional two days a month at Los Alamos. He or she should not only meet with laboratory leadership, but also with low- and mid-level bureaucrats, contracting officers, machinists, program managers, electricians, physicists, accountants, plumbers, and engineers to identify the barriers that exist to moving faster—and then knock down those barriers. If the NNSA Administrator is spending more than three weeks per month in Washington, DC, and less than one week per month in the field at Los Alamos National Lab, the Savannah River Site, Oak Ridge's Y-12 nuclear complex, or the PANTEX warhead assembly field in the Texas panhandle, then he is not doing his job.

Further, the next NNSA Administrator should ignore everything that is not weapons-related. The Secretary of Energy can focus on renewable energy and the power grid. The NNSA deputy administrators and associate administrators can focus on naval reactor fuel, counterterrorism, and nonproliferation. The next NNSA Administrator must laser focus on producing new warheads.

Conclusion

The United States is building nuclear weapons at a glacial pace. At the current pace, decades will pass before the current arsenal is replaced. This is unacceptable. By only operating at a fraction of Cold War–production capacity—and, subsequently, only producing a tiny fraction of the warheads produced in the Cold War—the United States runs the risk of undermining the credibility of its deterrent.

Given the current security environment, the risk of a nuclear war breaking is far higher—and has far greater consequences—than the risk of an environmental accident at a nuclear weapons lab. The nation must decide where it needs to best buy-down risk.

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