

# A Road Map for Rebuilding America's Nuclear Arsenal

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## KEY TAKEAWAYS

The U.S. nuclear arsenal is aging, with the newest nuclear weapon in the arsenal more than 35 years old, while major adversaries are increasing their threats.

The government must strengthen the strategic triad and the non-strategic force, and revive the U.S. defense industrial base, including the nuclear enterprise.

Over the next four years, America must build and field a credible deterrent that can deter, and, if necessary, defeat, adversary aggression and nuclear coercion.

The United States must rebuild and replace its Cold War-era nuclear deterrent, given the growing threats posed by the autocrats in Beijing, Moscow, Pyongyang, and Tehran.

China is the fastest growing nuclear power on the planet, building more than 100 new nuclear weapons per year.<sup>1</sup> Russia has more than 10 times as many operationally deployed non-strategic nuclear weapons than the United States.<sup>2</sup> North Korea regularly threatens the United States and its allies in South Korea and Japan with nuclear annihilation. And Tehran may be literal *weeks* away from the bomb.<sup>3</sup>

The U.S. nuclear arsenal is aging, with the newest nuclear weapon in the arsenal more than 35 years old.<sup>4</sup> The Minuteman III (MMIII) intercontinental ballistic missile's (ICBM's) original service life ended when Ronald Reagan was President.<sup>5</sup> The MMIII, according

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to the military, can no longer be life extended.<sup>6</sup> Its replacement, the Sentinel missile, is overbudget and behind schedule.<sup>7</sup> The ballistic missile submarine fleet is nearing the end of its lifespan. The B-21 Raider bomber is behind schedule.<sup>8</sup> In less than 12 months, the New START nuclear arms control treaty will expire, with little prospect of a replacement treaty.<sup>9</sup> Moreover, despite being in the 15th year of the 2010 nuclear modernization program, the Department of Energy has yet to build and field the first fully constituted and armed nuclear warhead.<sup>10</sup>

The United States must therefore take steps—beginning immediately and continuing over the next four years—to build and field a deterrent that is credible and can therefore deter, and, if necessary, defeat, adversary aggression and nuclear coercion.

Following is a list of actions that the Trump Administration should take to strengthen America’s strategic deterrent.

The list is bucketed into five categories, each of which are required for a credible deterrent. Each bucket lists several actions and the associated time frames in which the United States government can rebuild America’s nuclear arsenal and thereby deter America’s adversaries from carrying out strategic attacks on the United States or its allies.

## National-Level Guidance

At the national level, the Trump Administration should:

- **Issue an Executive Order on Rebuilding the Nuclear Arsenal.** The President should issue an executive order that gives guidance to the Department of Defense, Department of State, and Department of Energy that lays out the below vision for what the U.S. will do, to include monthly briefings of the President by the Secretary of Defense and Secretary of Energy on the nuclear program. *The President should issue this executive order no later than March 2025.*
- **Deliver a National Address on the Importance of the Nuclear Arsenal.** The President or the Secretary of Defense should address the nation and convey that, while the United States welcomes arms control and seeks a world without nuclear weapons, it will (until universal disarmament is achieved) field a credible, flexible, and effective deterrent second to none; that a robust strategic deterrent and extended deterrent serves U.S. national interests; that the United States reserves the right to pre-emptively destroy adversary orbital

platforms that carry nuclear weapons; and that the United States will make a series of changes regarding the size, composition, and posture of the U.S. nuclear arsenal. *The President or Secretary of Defense should deliver this address no later than April 2025.*

- **Issue a *Nuclear Posture Review*.** The Office of the Secretary of Defense should issue a *Nuclear Posture Review*, completed by a small (less than 12-person) team that uses existing policy and strategy language from key documents over the past 18 months and provides key programmatic decisions for the U.S. government to begin execution, delivered to Secretary of Defense Pete Hegseth and Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff General Charles Q. Brown, Jr. *The Office of the Secretary of Defense should issue the Nuclear Posture Review no later than May 2025.*
- **Develop a Two-Peer Deterrence Strategy.** The Defense Department should develop a classified two-peer nuclear strategy and associated employment guidance and corresponding nuclear force posture for the 2030 security environment, built on work already completed by the Joint Staff and the Office of the Secretary of Defense. *The Defense Department should develop a two-peer deterrence strategy no later than October 2025.*

## Strengthening the Strategic Triad

To strengthen America's strategic triad, the Trump Administration should:

- **Re-Open Shuttered Ballistic Missile Tubes.** The U.S. Navy should re-open the tubes on the *Ohio*-class ballistic missile submarine fleet that were closed due to the New START treaty, increasing the number of tubes per boat to a total of 24. *The Navy should re-open the tubes no later than March 2026.*
- **Upload Existing Warheads onto the MMIII Fleet.** The U.S. Air Force should upload two additional warheads per missile to the existing Minuteman III fleet. *The Air Force should upload the warheads no later than March 2026.*
- **Double the Production Rate of the B-21 Raider.** The Air Force should signal that it plans to procure the B-21 Raider fleet sooner

than projected, accepting 20 bombers a year rather than 10 bombers a year. *The Air Force should update its procurement orders no later than August 2026.*

- **Prepare to Increase the Size of the Ballistic Missile Submarine Fleet.** The Navy should signal to the nation's shipbuilders that the Navy may want to expand the *Columbia* ballistic missile submarine fleet from the programmed fleet of 12 boats to 16 boats, potentially with additional quad packs by the end of the 2030s, to increase the total number of missile tubes per boat from the current programmed 16 tubes to 24 tubes. *The Navy should update its procurement orders no later than October 2026.*
- **Put the B-21 on Strip Alert.** Following the delivery of the first wing of the B-21 Raider, the Air Force should reintroduce strip alerts to the bomber force, whereby nuclear-capable bombers are loaded with nuclear munitions and kept fueled and ready to launch on the tarmac, should it become necessary to conduct a no-notice bomber assurance and deterrence mission. *The Air Force should put the B-21 on strip alert no later than October 2027.*
- **Increase the Readiness of the Nevada National Security Site.** Given the deteriorating security environment, the United States must be able to conduct a nuclear explosive test, either to determine the efficacy of new nuclear warheads or to demonstrate stake and will in response to an adversary's attempt to coerce the United States with nuclear weapons. To that end, the Department of Energy should prepare the Nevada National Security Site to on-order conduct an explosive nuclear test. *The Nevada National Security Site should be prepared to conduct an explosive nuclear test by October 2027.*

## Strengthening the Non-Strategic Force

To strengthen the United States' non-strategic force, the Trump Administration should:

- **Upload Existing Nuclear Warheads onto Theater-Range Cruise Missiles.** The Air Force should conduct and complete an Analysis of Alternatives on uploading existing nuclear warheads from the Ready Reserve stockpile onto existing conventional cruise missiles, such as

Tomahawk Land Attack Missiles (TLAMs) and Joint Air-to-Surface Standoff Missiles-Extended Range (JASSM-ERs). *The Air Force should complete this analysis no later than July 2025.*

- **Open Talks with Key Allies on Expanding the Nuclear Mission.** The United States should open talks with key allies in Eastern Europe and the Western Pacific on the feasibility of expanding their role in the U.S. nuclear mission, to include those allies operating host-nation nuclear-capable aircraft flown by allied pilots.<sup>11</sup> *The United States should open talks no later than October 2025.*
- **Examine Additional Longer-term Non-Strategic Nuclear Weapons Capabilities Beyond the Nuclear-Armed Sea-Launched Cruise Missile (SLCM-N).** Given that the SLCM-N will not be online until well into the 2030s, the Defense Department should examine which other capabilities could deliver non-strategic nuclear weapons, to include potential high-speed ground-launched systems such as a nuclear variant of the Long-Range Hypersonic Weapon.<sup>12</sup> *The Defense Department should finalize the decision that results from the examination no later than February 2026.*
- **Develop a Long-Range Stand-Off Nuclear Munition for the F-35.** Given the proliferation of adversary air defenses and other anti-access systems, the Air Force should examine the utility and feasibility of a long-range stand-off non-strategic nuclear weapon option for nuclear-capable F-35 fighters. *The Air Force should complete its utility and feasibility analysis no later than October 2025.*
- **Certify a Globally Deployable Nuclear-Capable F-35 Squadron.** Given the need to expand the U.S. theater-range dual-capable aircraft fleet, the Air Force should certify an additional squadron of F-35s as nuclear-capable. This squadron should be one that is currently resident within the continental United States. *The Air Force should make this certification no later than March 2026.*

## Re-Invigorating the Nuclear Enterprise and Defense Industrial Base

To revive the U.S. defense industrial base, including the nuclear enterprise, the Trump Administration should:

- **Ease Workplace Safety and Environmental Restrictions at the National Nuclear Security Administration (NNSA).** National Environmental Protection Act and workplace safety regulations at Savannah River Plutonium Production Facility and Los Alamos are paralyzing the ability of the NNSA to move with purpose. In order to increase the speed at which the United States can produce new nuclear warheads and capabilities, the President and the Secretary of Energy should waive or reinterpret onerous environmental and workplace safety regulations.<sup>13</sup> *The President and Energy Secretary should ease these restrictions no later than April 2025.*
- **Direct the Department of Government Efficiency (DOGE) to Accelerate the Nuclear Modernization Timelines.** The NNSA now assesses that it will not be able to build 80 plutonium pits before 2035. This is unacceptable given the pace of Chinese nuclear expansion. Accordingly, DOGE should assist the NNSA in developing process improvements that will get warhead and plutonium pit production back on schedule. *DOGE should complete an analysis of the pit production schedule no later than July 2025.*
- **Work with Allies and Partners to Secure Weapons-Related Exotic Isotopes.** The American nuclear weapons complex requires not only plutonium, but also enriched uranium, lithium, tritium, beryllium, and other exotic isotopes. Given the ongoing delays, the United States should explore other sources for these elements. *The Department of Energy should complete an analysis of other sources no later than August 2025.*
- **Accelerate Production Rate and Deployment of the D5 LE2 Trident Missile.** Given the potential need to expand the strategic arsenal, the Navy should accelerate the production rate and deployment dates for the D5 LE2 submarine-launched ballistic missile. *The Navy should begin this acceleration no later than October 2027.*

## Funding the Nuclear Deterrent

In order to pay for these investments in America's nuclear deterrent, the Trump Administration should:

- **Secure \$100 Billion of Additional Funding for the Arsenal Over 10 years.** Working with Congress, the Department of Defense should

seek increased appropriations to the nuclear enterprise, beginning with the fiscal year (FY) 2026 Defense Budget. Over the next 10 years, funding to the nuclear enterprise should be increased by \$10 billion a year.<sup>14</sup> *This additional funding is included in the FY 2025 Defense Budget Request.*

This is a significant list of activities. But the U.S. nuclear arsenal is the ultimate guarantor of American security and sovereignty. Given the threats posed to us today, the United States must take the steps needed to ensure that the arsenal remains credible over the coming decades.

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## Endnotes

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