

Trump removes restrictions on land mine use by US military

Kevin Reed
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The White House formally announced on January 31 that President Donald Trump had canceled all restrictions against the use of anti-personnel land mines by the US military. Outside of the Korean Peninsula, the US has not officially used land mines since the Gulf War of 1991.

A press statement from the desk of White House press secretary Stephanie Grisham said, “The Department of Defense has determined that restrictions imposed on American forces by the Obama Administration’s policy could place them at a severe disadvantage during a conflict against our adversaries. The President is unwilling to accept this risk to our troops.”

Grisham also stated that the Department of Defense is issuing a new landmine policy that will “authorize Combatant Commanders, in exceptional circumstances, to employ advanced, non-persistent landmines specifically designed to reduce unintended harm to civilians and partner forces.”

Announced several days before his State of the Union address on February 4 and his acquittal in the Senate impeachment trial on February 5, Trump’s reversal of land mine restrictions is a signal to the US military and his fascistic political base that the administration is committed to aggressive imperialist wars, including ground wars, with massive military and civilian casualties.

Grisham concluded her brief statement by declaring, “President Trump is rebuilding our military, and it is stronger than ever. The President will continue to support and equip our troops so that they will forever remain the greatest fighting force in the world.”

It is well known internationally that anti-personnel land mines and cluster munitions are among the most indiscriminate and deadly weapons of war that continue

to kill civilians, especially children, long after military conflict ends. Prior to the international ban on land mines in 1997, up to 25,000 civilians were killed and thousands more injured and maimed each year by explosive devices, which can remain active for decades. Since the ban, the number of civilians killed by land mines has fallen by 75 percent, down to 6,500 per year.

The continued presence of land mines around the world is a reminder of the nature of the crimes committed against humanity over more than a century of imperialist war. There are currently an estimated 78 countries in the world with approximately 110 million active mines on their territory, the majority of which are in Africa, the Middle East and Southeast Asia. Egypt has 23 million unexploded mines in areas of its northern coast that were placed by Allied forces in World War II and the Sinai Peninsula which was contaminated with landmines from 1956 to 1973 during the wars between Egypt and Israel.

The US has never completely ended the use of land mines and has refused to sign the international Mine Ban Treaty—also known as the Ottawa Treaty—that was agreed to by 160 countries in 1997 and implemented in 1999. The Pentagon officially ended use of the weapons outside of Korea after the Gulf War for pragmatic military reasons related to the aerial deployment of more than 100,000 self-destructing land mines in Kuwait that became a barrier to ground troop movement and resulted in US casualties.

Like that of the administration of George W. Bush, the Obama White House refused to sign the Mine Ban Treaty on the grounds that doing so would jeopardize US “national defense needs” and “security commitments to our friends and allies.” This snubbing of the international community did not prevent Barack Obama from receiving the Nobel Peace Prize in

December 2009, one month after he announced the US would continue using land mines.

In June 2014, the Obama administration announced a ban on the production and acquisition of anti-personnel land mines, and in September 2014 implemented a policy that committed the US to stop using cluster munitions and to destroy its stocks, not because they indiscriminately kill human beings, but because they were “unreliable.”

The fraud of the Obama administration’s land mine policy is revealed in its continued use of such weapons in the Korean Peninsula. In this “unique circumstance,” the US military scattered approximately 1 million land mines south of the demilitarized zone after the Korean War ended in 1953 in order to protect American bases in the area. Thousands of South Koreans have been killed in unmarked minefields over decades.

According to the website JustSecurity.org, “The US has limited stocks [of land mines] to draw on. In 2014, the Pentagon disclosed that the US has an ‘active stockpile of just over 3 million anti-personnel mines in the inventory.’ ... The US last produced antipersonnel mines in 1997, when it manufactured 450,000 ADAM artillery-delivered and 13,200 air-dropped CBU-89/B Gator mines. It has spent years on a costly, but as yet unresolved, search for ‘alternatives’ to antipersonnel mines.”

The plan to remove the Obama-era restrictions has been underway since the early days of the Trump White House in 2017. As stated by the Pentagon’s chief spokesman, Jonathan Hoffman on February 3, the change in policy “was the result of an extensive conversation” with different departments of the executive branch.

The new land mine initiative is part of a broader military and geopolitical shift that began with the reorientation of foreign policy contained in the National Defense Strategy announced by then Secretary of Defense James Mattis in January 2018. The renewed use of cluster bombs and anti-personnel land mines that kill and maim over a wide range is an integral part of the Pentagon’s war plans that include infantry combat against the US “great power” rivals, Russia and China.

According to a report in the *New York Times* on Friday, “Former Defense Department officials said the debate about reintroducing land mines and other so-called area-denial weapons came to a head in 2017 as

the administration analyzed Russia’s rapid invasion and annexation of Crimea.” The *Times* went on to report that as of October 2019 the Army had invested \$60 million with Northrop Grumman and Textron to develop new anti-vehicle mines at Picatinny Arsenal, an Army weapons research center in New Jersey.

While the new Defense Department’s policy document—signed by current Defense Secretary Mark Esper—focuses on the development of “self-destruction” and “self-deactivation” features that limit “the risk of unintended harm to non-combatants,” it is unmistakable that the White House and Pentagon are mapping out scenarios for major new wars against enemies with formidable ground war capabilities. In its drive for global domination, the Pentagon is envisioning minefields that either self-destruct or self-deactivate after a specified period of time or are permanent and can be turned on and off at will by remote control.

The White House policy change has heightened tensions with its European allies, at least at the moment. In a rare formal criticism of Washington, the EU issued a statement that said that the ban on anti-personnel land mines had “saved tens of thousands of people in the past twenty years ... Their use anywhere, anytime, and by any actor remains completely unacceptable to the European Union.”

Similar meaningless statements have been made by US Democrats such as Vermont Senator Patrick Leahy, who said, “This decision, like so many others of this White House, reverses the gains we have made and weakens our global leadership.”



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