

Pentagon “adjusts nuclear deterrence strategy” amid escalating war with Russia

Kevin Reed
22 November 2024

The Pentagon is adjusting its nuclear deterrence strategy in a global environment with “multiple nuclear peer adversaries,” including Russia and China, according to a report in DoD News Channel published Thursday.

The DoD’s report quoted extensively from the comments of Richard C. Johnson, deputy assistant secretary of Defense for Nuclear and Countering Weapons of Mass Destruction Policy (N-CWMD).

Johnson said adjustments are being made to the 2022 Nuclear Posture Review, a document that was published as part of the Biden administration’s national defense strategy issued in October 2022.

Johnson’s comments were made during a panel discussion at the Center for Strategic and International Studies (CSIS) Project on Nuclear Issues (PONI) in Washington D.C. that took place on Wednesday.

The panel discussion was part of an event held to launch a CSIS report entitled, “Project Atom 2024: Intra-War Deterrence in a Two-Peer Environment,” a 94-page document that discusses possible responses to nuclear war such as “a scenario involving near-simultaneous battlefield nuclear use by Russia and China.”

Johnson said, “We are now in a world where we’re facing multiple nuclear competitors, multiple states that are growing, diversifying and modernizing their nuclear arsenals and also, unfortunately, prioritizing the role that nuclear weapons play in their national security strategies.”

The DoD reported that Johnson said the changes in US nuclear posture were required, “in light of enhanced nuclear capabilities of China and Russia and possible lack of nuclear arms control agreements after February.” He also said that Biden’s Nuclear Posture Review was never intended to be a static document and

would need to be revised, “as the security environment evolves.”

The CSIS event and DoD report took place within the context of a significant escalation of the imperialist war against Russia after Ukraine launched US and UK long-range missiles deep inside Russia on Tuesday and Wednesday. By authorizing Ukraine to use ATACMS and Storm Shadow missiles and ignoring the warnings issued by the Kremlin that it is prepared to use nuclear weapons in response, Washington and its NATO allies in Europe have brought the world to brink of a third world war.

While the position of imperialist politicians and much of the corporate news media is that the Putin regime is bluffing—UK Prime Minister Keir Starmer said Russia was engaging in “irresponsible rhetoric”—the CSIS panel discussion and DoD news report show that top Pentagon officials are well aware of the threat of nuclear war.

For example, the “Project Atom 2024” report by the CSIS states in its introduction:

There is a growing risk that the United States and its allies could face scenarios in which one or more adversaries might resort to nuclear weapons use in a regional conflict. This risk is especially evident in Russian strategic theory and doctrine, which envisions regional deterrence as complementing global deterrence. Some Russian military experts see the potential use of nonstrategic nuclear weapons for “de-escalation of military actions and their termination on conditions favorable to the Russian Federation,” or “a demonstration to the enemy of resolve to defend [Russia’s] interests

by escalating the use of nuclear weapons (tactical) and forcing him to forego further aggression by the threat of use of strategic nuclear weapons.”

The DoD report quotes Johnson saying the US remains committed to a safe, secure and reliable nuclear deterrent. However, in an environment of “multiple nuclear peer adversaries,” deterrence for US imperialism means nuclear superiority and first strike capability. As the DoD report explained, the nuclear modernization program begun during the Obama administration and continued by the first Trump administration and the Biden administration “while necessary, may be insufficient moving forward.”

Johnson gave examples of measures being taken “to reduce risk to the department’s nuclear modernization program.” Among these are the development of the B61-12 gravity bomb and “the enhanced readiness of nuclear armed and powered Ohio-class submarines.”

The initial plan to design and build the B61-12 bomb—a low-to-intermediate yield strategic and tactical nuclear weapon featuring a two-stage radiation implosion design—was scheduled to begin in 2027 and be completed by 2050. In 2023, these plans were changed, with a few dozen B61-12 bombs having already been produced.

The DoD report also covered Johnson’s comments on the submission to Congress on November 15 of a “491 Report,” which describes changes to previous guidance from the Biden administration on “deterrence challenges” posed by “the growth, modernization and increasing diversity of potential adversaries’ nuclear arsenals.”

Among the topics covered in the 491 Report are plans for war against multiple simultaneous nuclear-armed adversaries and “escalation management” in response to a nuclear attack or “high consequence,” non-nuclear strategic attack against the US.

In analyzing the Biden administration’s National Defense Strategy documents of October 2022, which expanded on the Trump administration’s strategic shift of foreign policy from the “war on terror” to “inter-state strategic competition,” the *World Socialist Web Site* wrote:

These documents, which were not seriously discussed in the US media, make clear the fundamental falsehood that the massive US military buildup this year is a response to “Russian aggression.” In reality, in the thinking of the White House and Pentagon war planners, the massive increases in military spending and plans for war with China are created by “dramatic changes in geopolitics, technology, economics, and our environment.”

These documents make clear that the United States sees the economic rise of China as an existential threat, to be responded to with the threat of military force. The United States sees the subjugation of Russia as a critical steppingstone toward the conflict with China.

These documents must be taken as a warning by workers all over the world. In asserting its global hegemony, American capitalism will go to any lengths. As shown by the horrifying legacy of the US invasions of Iraq and Afghanistan, American imperialism is prepared to kill millions of people in the name of its campaign of global domination.



To contact the WSWS and the
Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact