Donald Trump: US must greatly expand nuclear capabilities

3 hours ago

Image copyright
AP

Image caption
A spokesman later said Mr Trump was referring to the need to combat the threat of nuclear weapons

Donald Trump has called for the US to "greatly strengthen and expand" its nuclear capabilities.

The president-elect, who takes office next month, said the US must take such action "until such time as the world comes to its senses regarding nukes".

His spokesman later said that he was referring to the need to prevent nuclear proliferation.

Mr Trump spoke hours after President Vladimir Putin said Russia needs to bolster its military nuclear potential.

The US has 7,100 nuclear weapons and Russia has 7,300, according to the US nonpartisan Arms Control Association.

Mr Trump's comments came in the form of a tweet, giving no other details.

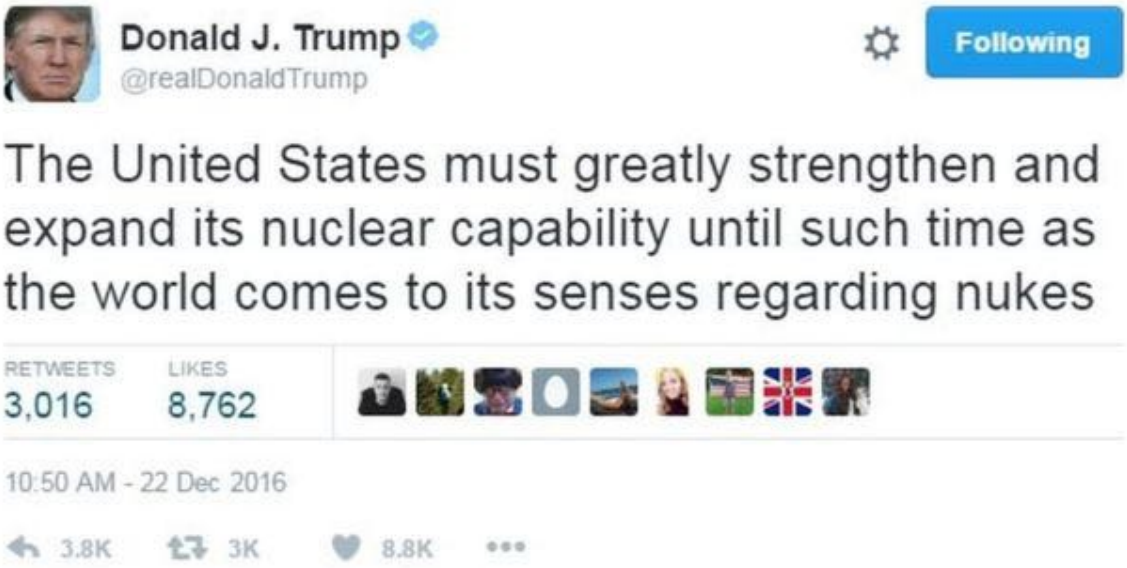

Image copyright
TWITTER

Hours later, Jason Miller, the communications manager for the Trump transition team, explained he "was referring to the threat of nuclear proliferation and the critical need to prevent it - particularly to and among terrorist organizations and unstable and rogue regimes".

Mr Miller also added that the president-elect "emphasised the need to improve and modernize our deterrent capability as a vital way to pursue peace through strength".

Mr Trump's tweet came after President Putin met with his military advisers to review Russian military activities in 2016.

Image copyright
GETTY IMAGES
Image caption
Russia is stronger than any potential foe, Mr Putin told his advisers

"We need to strengthen the military potential of strategic nuclear forces, especially with missile complexes that can reliably penetrate any existing and prospective missile defence systems," Mr Putin said.
Russia, he added "must carefully monitor any changes in the balance of power and in the political-military situation in the world, especially along Russian borders", possibly referring to US missile defences in eastern Europe which the Pentagon says are to counter Iran.
During Mr Trump's campaign he referred to nuclear proliferation as the "single biggest problem" facing the world, but also said he could not rule out using nuclear weapons against Europe.
Mr Trump's defeated Democratic rival Hillary Clinton repeatedly cast her opponent during the campaign as too erratic and lacking in the diplomatic skills required to avoid a nuclear war.
She mocked him by saying "a man who can be provoked by a tweet should not have his fingers anywhere near the nuclear codes".

A new era dawns: By Laura Bicker, BBC News, Washington DC
This is a radical departure from President Obama's current policy.
Mr Trump has offered no further details on his plans but he has hinted in the past that he favoured an expansion of the nuclear programme.
He was asked in interviews whether he would use weapons of mass destruction against an enemy and he said that it would be an absolute last stance, but he added that he would want to be unpredictable.
In contrast, President Obama has talked of the US commitment to seek peace and security without nuclear weapons.
He has sought to reduce the nation's arsenal in favour of more special operations forces and precise tactical strikes.
But in 29 days the nuclear codes and the nation's defence policy will no longer be in his hands.

In interviews before his surprise victory Mr Trump said that other countries should spend more on their own defence budgets, and forgo US protection, because "we can't afford to do it anymore".
He has said he is in favour of countries such as Japan and South Korea developing nuclear weapons "because it's going to happen anyway".

"It's only a question of time," he told the New York Timed editorial board, adding that "they're going to start having them or we have to get rid of them entirely."
Mr Trump is spending the festive season at his Mar-a-Lago resort in Florida, where he has been meeting with campaign advisers.

WHAT HAPPENED: Trump threatens a nuclear arms race.

"The United States must greatly strengthen and expand its nuclear capability until such time as the world comes to its senses regarding nukes," Trump tweets.

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Donald J. Trump

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@realDonaldTrump

The United States must greatly strengthen and expand its nuclear capability until such time as the world comes to its senses regarding nukes

5:50 AM - 23 Dec 2016

18,93718,937 Retweets

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Hours earlier in Moscow, Russian President Vladimir Putin said in a defense speech in Moscow that Russia needs to "enhance the combat capability of strategic nuclear forces, primarily by strengthening missile complexes that will be guaranteed to penetrate existing and future missile defense systems."

Trump, Putin both seek to boost their

nuclear capability

By **Stephen Collinson** and **Jeremy Diamond**, CNN

Updated 1143 GMT (1943 HKT) December 23, 2016

(CNN) President-elect Donald Trump signaled Thursday that he will look to "strengthen and expand" the US's nuclear capability hours after Russian President Vladimir Putin pledged to enhance his country's nuclear forces.

The exchange appeared to raise the prospect of a new arms race between the two nuclear superpowers, which between them boast more than 14,000 nuclear warheads, the still deadly legacy of their four-decades long Cold War standoff.

But the comments by Putin, who is presiding over a project to restore Russia's lost global power and influence, and Trump, who will shortly become the US commander-in-chief, did not spell out exactly what each side is proposing or whether a major change of nuclear doctrine is in the offing.

Trump weighed in with a tweet just hours after Putin spoke following a meeting with his military advisers to review the activity of the past year.

"The United States must greatly strengthen and expand its nuclear capability until such time as the world comes to its senses regarding nukes," Trump wrote.

On Friday, Putin downplayed the risk of a new nuclear arms race between Russia and the US and said there was "nothing new" in Trump's tweet.

"During his election campaign, (Trump) said US needs to bolster nuclear capabilities and armed forces in general and there is nothing new," Putin

said at this annual news conference.

It was not immediately clear if the President-elect is proposing an entire new nuclear policy that he would begin to flesh out once he takes office next year.

Trump could also be referring to plans to modernize the current US nuclear arsenal that are currently underway and will cost hundreds of billions of dollars. The Obama administration has outlined a plan to modernize delivery systems, command and control systems and to refurbish warheads in the US nuclear triad -- the US force of sea, airborne and missile delivered nuclear weapons.

The Cold War: Then and now 01:45

But the plan keeps the size of the nuclear force at existing levels.

Trump's tweet appeared to envisage an expansion of the size of the US nuclear force, but it was not immediately clear if that is the case.

Trump communications director Jason Miller sent a statement to try to explain the President-elect's tweet on nuclear capability.

He suggested Trump was "referring to the threat of nuclear proliferation and the critical need to prevent it," although that was not referenced in the tweet. He also said Trump was emphasizing the need to "modernize our deterrent capability."

In Moscow earlier Tuesday, Putin said in a defense speech that Russia needs to "enhance the combat capability of strategic nuclear forces, primarily by strengthening missile complexes that will be guaranteed to penetrate existing and future missile defense systems."

Putin's remarks appeared to suggest that he was talking about new weapons systems that could overcome US missile defenses, a development that could force the US to respond. It was not clear,

however, if he was contemplating an expansion in the total numbers of Russian weapons or of the stocks of those arms that are deployed.

RELATED: 3 things to know about that nuclear triad

Trump and Putin have suggested Trump's inauguration next month will ring in closer relations after the two sides retreated to their most entrenched positions since the end of the Cold War.

The ambiguity and timing of Putin's remarks also suggested that he may be laying an opening gambit in his relationship with the new US President-elect.

The Russian President is seeking to return Russia to the front ranks of global influence, a project that is key to his domestic political survival and often involves actively seeking to undermine US power.

His power plays in Ukraine and in Syria and military maneuvers close to the borders of former Warsaw Pact states have alarmed Western leaders and stoked tensions in Europe.

And while Russia's economic and conventional military strength pales beside that of the US, its nuclear arsenal remains the root of its power and prestige.

It is also unlikely to be a coincidence that Putin's remarks came three days before the 25th anniversary of the fall of the Soviet Union, a collapse he

views as a disaster of history.

Trump, who sees foreign policy through the eyes of an ultimate deal maker, may have felt the need to respond to Putin's remarks. He did so a day after meeting with his incoming military officials at his Mar-a-Lago resort in Florida. CNN's Barbara Starr reported that the talks included discussion of plans to modernize the US nuclear arsenal.

The President-elect's choice of Twitter to make such an important and sensitive statement was characteristic of his operating style.

But it underlined how the shorthanded communication of policy by social media is imprecise and open to multiple interpretations that are already posing problems for foreign governments as they seek to divine Trump's true intentions.

Still, the suggestion that he could preside over a new nuclear arms race will spook critics who argued he showed himself unfamiliar with basic nuclear doctrine during the campaign.

Democratic nominee Hillary Clinton had argued that it would be a mistake to hand the US nuclear codes over to a man who could be "baited with a tweet."

The President-elect also caused consternation in Asia by suggesting that Japan and South Korea who are protected under the US nuclear umbrella might think about developing their own weapons, a move that could unleash a new global nuclear arms race.

Trump's comment on Twitter also strikes a sharp contrast with the early months of the administration of President Barack Obama, who committed himself to the symbolic goal of a world without nuclear weapons -- an act that helped him win the Nobel Peace Prize.

Obama also concluded a new Strategic Arms Limitation Treaty (START) with Putin's predecessor as Russian President, Dmitry Medvedev. The treaty imposed new limits on the numbers of launchers and warheads

each side have deployed.

How fast can a nuke fly? 02:27

During the campaign, Trump argued that the US needs to modernize its aging nuclear infrastructure.

"Our nuclear program has fallen way behind, and they've gone wild with their nuclear program. Not good. Our government shouldn't have allowed that to happen," Trump said during his second debate in October against Clinton. "We are old. We're tired. We're exhausted in terms of nuclear. A very bad thing."

America's nuclear submarines are all more than 30 years old and its most dominant long-range bomber remains the 60-year-old B-52s. The Pentagon has also called for upgrading the US arsenal of ICBMs, or intercontinental ballistic missiles.

The Pentagon has estimated that it will need to spend as much as $18 billion per year over the next 15 years -- for a total of $270 billion -- to modernize the nuclear triad.

The United States has 7,100 nuclear warheads while Russia has 7,300, according to the non-partisan Arms Control Association.

The US has 1,367 warheads deployed on inter-continental ballistic missiles, heavy bombers and on submarines, the State Department said in September. Russia has 1,796 in the same category.

Russia's inventory of deployed warheads has risen in number owing to fluctuations in Moscow's modernization program and is not seen as a strategic worry by the US military. The United States currently has fewer total weapons, including those in reserve, than Russia because it has dismantled more obsolete devices.

Trump Says U.S. Would 'Outmatch' Rivals in a New

Nuclear Arms Race

By **MICHAEL D. SHEAR**DEC. 23, 2016

President-elect Donald J. Trump, with Michael T. Flynn, his national security adviser, spoke to reporters at his Mar-a-Lago estate in Palm Beach, Fla., on Wednesday.

Credit

Kevin D. Liles for The New York Times

WEST PALM BEACH, Fla. — President-elect Donald J. Trump on Friday welcomed a new nuclear weapons arms race, vowing in an off-camera interview with a television host that America would "outmatch" any adversary. The comment came one day after he said in a post on Twitter that the United States should "strengthen and expand" its own nuclear capabilities.

The president-elect escalated his comments about nuclear weapons with the show of bravado during a brief, off-air telephone conversation from his estate in Florida, according to Mika Brzezinski, a co-host of MSNBC's "Morning Joe" program.

"Let it be an arms race," Mr. Trump said, according to Ms. Brzezinski, who described her conversation with the president-elect on the morning news program moments later. Mr. Trump added: "We will outmatch them at every pass and outlast them all."

A few hours after those comments, Mr. Trump released a letter he said he received on Dec. 15 from President Vladimir V. Putin in which the Russian leader offered holiday greetings and urged a "constructive and pragmatic manner" among leaders in both countries.

"Relations between Russia and the U.S. remain an important factor in ensuring stability and security of the modern world," Mr. Putin wrote in the letter. "I hope that after you assume the position of the President of the United States of America we will be able — by acting in a constructive and pragmatic manner — to take real steps to restore the framework of bilateral cooperation in different areas as well as bring our level of collaboration on the international scene to a qualitatively new level."

In his statement, Mr. Trump called it "a very nice letter" and said "his thoughts are so correct. I hope both sides are able to live up to these thoughts, and we do not have to travel an alternate path."

Mr. Trump did not elaborate on what he meant by an "alternate path." But despite his praise of Mr. Putin's letter, the president-elect's comments on Friday about nuclear weapons appear to reflect a willingness on his part to restart the costly and dangerous Cold War-era weapons competition between the United States and the old Soviet Union. Both nations have sought for decades to reverse that buildup of huge nuclear arsenals.

The comments on Friday and the Twitter post Thursday appeared to be meant specifically for Mr. Putin, who had said in an end-of-the-year speech to his military this week that Russia must bolster its nuclear capabilities to "reliably penetrate" the missile defense systems of any other nation.

The Russian leader, who spoke during a lengthy news conference in Moscow on Friday, said the Kremlin would continue to modernize its armed forces, including nuclear weapons. Russia is not seeking a new arms race or to develop new nuclear warheads, he said, but is instead seeking ways to improve its armaments so that they could

pierce American missile defenses.

Trump's Nuclear Weapons Tweet, Translated and Explained

Mr. Trump, in a Twitter post on Thursday, appeared to announce his new nuclear strategy. Here is what he might have meant.

Mr. Trump, who spent Friday morning playing golf with Tiger Woods at Trump International Golf Club, has not provided any details about his plans regarding an expansion of nuclear abilities. But Sean Spicer, the incoming press secretary for Mr. Trump's administration, said earlier on the "Morning Joe" program that the president-elect's Twitter post about nuclear weapons was intended to send a message to America's adversaries around the world.

Asked if Mr. Trump's post on Twitter was a response to Mr. Putin's speech to the military, Mr. Spicer said, "I think it's putting every nation on notice that the United States is going to reassert its position in the globe."

Mr. Spicer added: "Other countries need to understand that if they expand their nuclear capabilities, this president is not going to sit back, he's going to act."

After Mr. Trump's comments to Ms. Brzezinski, Mr. Spicer appeared on NBC's "Today" program and said the president-elect was trying to avoid an arms race by signaling to the Russians and other adversaries that he was willing to match any nuclear expansion they might try.

When Matt Lauer, one of the show's hosts, suggested that matching an adversary's expansion was the definition of an arms race, Mr. Spicer insisted that would not happen while Mr. Trump was president.

"There's not going to be," Mr. Spicer said, "because he's going to ensure that other countries get the message that he's not going to sit

back and allow that. And what's going to happen is they will come to their senses and we will all be just fine."

Friday morning's comments by Mr. Trump and Mr. Spicer about the president-elect's intentions regarding the nuclear arsenal stood in contrast to what other aides said late Thursday evening. Jason Miller, the incoming communications director, said in a statement that Mr. Trump's post on Twitter was about the spread of nuclear capabilities around the globe.

"President-elect Trump was referring to the threat of nuclear proliferation and the critical need to prevent it — particularly to and among terrorist organizations and unstable and rogue regimes," Mr. Miller wrote.

Kellyanne Conway, who will become counselor to the president in the White House, appeared on "The Rachel Maddow Show" on MSNBC on Thursday evening and downplayed the significance of Mr. Trump's post.

"I don't think the tweet was groundbreaking in this regard. It seems that President Obama himself has invested, has called for an upgrade in our capabilities," Ms. Conway said. Referring to Mr. Trump, she said, "I think in his quest to keep us safe and secure, he's putting the world on notice that he will do what he thinks he needs to do to keep us safe and secure."

Donald Trump declares 'Let it be a nuclear arms race' with Russia

By Roland Oliphant, Nick Allen

9:40 AM Saturday Dec 24, 2016

Donald Trump explicitly declared that he was ready for a new nuclear arms race with Russia and claimed that the United States would win it.

In comments that alarmed non-proliferation experts and undermined decades of US nuclear policy Mr Trump said: "Let it be an arms race.

The United States must greatly strengthen and expand its nuclear capability until such time as the world comes to its senses regarding nukes

— Donald J. Trump (@realDonaldTrump) December 22, 2016

We will outmatch them at every pass and outlast them all."

It came as the US president-elect also released what he called a "very nice letter" he received from Vladimir Putin, the Russian president, congratulating him on his election victory.

According to a translation by Mr Trump's team the letter was dated Dec 15 at the Kremlin, addressed to "His Excellency Donald Trump" and signed "V. Putin".

President-elect Donald Trump praises letter from Russian President Vladimir Putin: "His thoughts are so correct." https://t.co/vU1LZoZXyv pic.twitter.com/Mh6t27mcfJ

— CNN (@CNN) December 23, 2016

In the four paragraph missive Mr Putin spoke of the importance of "ensuring security and stability in the modern world" and "bringing "bilateral co-operation to a qualitatively new level".

The Russian leader also wished Mr Trump and his family "warmest Christmas and New Year greetings" and "sound health, happiness, well-being, success and all the best".

A spokesman for Mr Putin confirmed the Russian president had sent Mr Trump a Christmas letter.

Mr Trump said: "A very nice letter from Vladimir Putin. His thoughts are so correct."

But in what some viewed as a veiled warning Mr Trump added " I hope both sides are able to live up to these thoughts, and we do not have to travel an alternate path."

The president-elect's remark about a new arms race was made on Friday in an off-camera phone interview with Mika Brzezinski, a well-known US television journalist, who reported it immediately.
"We can say with certainty - we are stronger now than any potential aggressor. Anyone!"Vladimir Putin

She had asked Mr Trump to clarify a statement he made on Twitter the previous day. In that statement he had said the US "must greatly strengthen and expand its nuclear capability until such time as the world comes to its senses regarding nukes".

Mr Trump's spokesman Sean Spicer later said the president-elect's intention was to put other

countries on notice not to expand their nuclear capabilities.

Mr Spicer said: "It's a warning to them that this president isn't going to sit idly by. He's a man of action. He's not going to sit back and allow that to happen without acting in kind.

"He will not take anything off the table. He is going to do what it takes to protect our country. And what's going to happen is they will come to their senses and we will all be just fine."

At the same time Mr Trump was declaring an arms race Mr Putin was holding his end of year press conference in Moscow.

In it Mr Putin said he was unconcerned about the prospect of a US nuclear build-up, and called Mr Trump's tweet "nothing surprising".

Mr Putin said: "In the course of his election campaign he spoke about the necessity of strengthening the US nuclear arsenal, and strengthening the armed forces. There's nothing unusual here."

He added: "If anyone is unleashing an arms race it's not us. We will never spend resources on an arms race that we can't afford."

In conciliatory remarks Mr Putin also praised the US president-elect for "uniting society" and listening to the will of the American people.

He added: "No one thought he could win except us." Mr Putin said he would be prepared to visit Mr Trump in Washington if invited.

He said: "If Trump invites me to travel to the United States I will of course go. I expect a change in our relations.

They can't be worse."

Mr Putin also accepted the US military, not Russia's, was the most powerful in the world.

He said: "Nobody is arguing with that."

Joseph Cirincione, president of the Ploughshares Fund, which works to prevent the spread of nuclear weapons, said: "Trump is sewing chaos through our alliances. The whole world is listening to this. China is listening very closely to this. Do they need more weapons? What about Pakistan and India?

"Ronald Reagan never said something like this. In nuclear policy every word matters. This is unprecedented and bizarre."

The chaos theory

of Donald Trump: Sowing confusion through tweets

President-elect Donald Trump talks to members of the media after a meeting with military leadership at the Mar-a-Lago club in Palm Beach, Fla., Wednesday. (Jabin Botsford/The Washington Post)

By John Wagner and Abby Phillip December 23 at 5:36 PM

Donald Trump's sudden embrace this week of a nuclear arms race — and his staff's scramble to minimize the fallout — underscored an emerging modus operandi for

the president-elect: governance by chaos.

Since winning the election, Trump has seemed to revel in tossing firecrackers in all directions, often using Twitter to offer brief but provocative pronouncements on foreign and domestic policies alike — and leaving it to others to flesh out his true intentions.

In the past week alone, Trump has publicly pitted two military contractors against each other, sowed confusion about the scope of his proposed ban on foreign Muslims, and needled China after its seizure of a U.S. underwater drone.

But nothing has created more consternation for many foreign policy experts than Trump's assertion Thursday on Twitter that the country should "greatly strengthen and expand" its nuclear capability.

On Friday, after his staff had tried to temper his comments, Trump doubled down — telling a television talk-show host that in an arms race against any competitor, the United States would "outmatch them at

every pass.”

'Let it be an arms race': Trump's history of discussing nuclear weapons

Play Video2:02

President-elect Donald Trump has called nuclear weapons “the single greatest problem the world has” – but he's also made some controversial statements about them. (Peter Stevenson/The Washington Post)

Trump has pledged to shake up both Washington and the world order, and boosters argue that a degree of unpredictability can be useful, particularly when it comes to foreign policy. But the mixed messages and erratic nature of his pronouncements have alarmed even some Republicans, who say it’s important to know how seriously to take the leader of the free world.

“We’re just operating in this world where you cannot believe the things he says,” said Eliot Cohen, a foreign policy expert and former George W. Bush administration official at the State Department. “It will have large consequences for our allies and our adversaries, and it’s going to greatly magnify the danger

of miscalculation by all kinds of people."

[Trump's latest remarks stoke talk of a nuclear arms race]

Trump's team has struggled with the new resonance that becoming president-elect has given Trump's Twitter habit. They have repeatedly said that his statements on social media do not necessarily reflect his official policy and have at times sought to play down the import of his actions.

But Trump supporters say the rest of Washington is going to have to get used to his more freewheeling style.

"People who expect the past are going to be shocked that there's a new way of doing things," said Barry Bennett, a Republican strategist who served as an adviser to Trump during the general-election campaign. "This is a glimpse of where he's headed, and in a way, it's highly transparent, but just not the way Washington has done business for the past 40 or 50 years."

But others warn that Democrats and Republicans alike

on Capitol Hill could have a hard time reading Trump and discerning his true priorities if he continues to operate as he has during the transition.

"It's difficult to separate the wheat from the chaff — what comes out that he really wants and what's just said at the spur of the moment," said Jim Manley, a former longtime aide to Senate Minority Leader Harry M. Reid (D-Nev.). "In the past, a president-elect doing something like this would have been unfathomable."

The imbroglio over nuclear arms began Thursday with a tweet from Trump in which he said the United States "must greatly strengthen and expand its nuclear capability until such time as the world comes to its senses regarding nukes."

Trump made no mention of what spurred his thoughts, but the tweet followed an address by Russian President Vladimir Putin in which he said his country's nuclear stockpile needs fortifying.

Trump's tweet seemed to signal a break with four

decades of policy charted by presidents of both parties — and it sent his staff scrambling to explain his thinking.

[Trump continues to sow confusion over his plan for Muslims entering the country]

In a television interview Thursday night, Kellyanne Conway — named counselor to the president earlier in the day — played down its sweep.

"He's not trying to change a policy through Twitter," Conway told MSNBC's Rachel Maddow. "What he's merely saying is that he wants us to be ready to defend ourselves."

Conway said Trump's tweet was not necessarily aimed at Russia but directed at "a regime that would do us harm or a rogue nation."

Trump was not backing down Friday morning, however. On MSNBC's "Morning Joe," co-host Mika Brzezinski relayed a conversation she had with Trump in which he reportedly said, "Let it be an arms race. We will

outmatch them at every pass."

As they discussed Trump's nuclear vow, Brzezinski and host Joe Scarborough, a former congressman from Florida, were both dressed in pajamas as they sat in front of a fireplace on their final show before Christmas.

Shortly after the segment aired, Sean Spicer, who was named Trump's White House press secretary on Thursday, suggested that Trump was describing a hypothetical situation and speaking about what would happen if other countries don't "come to their senses."

"If another country wants to expand their nuclear capability, the U.S. is not going to sit back and idly by," Spicer said on NBC's "Today" show. "But just to be clear: The president isn't saying we're *going* to do this. He said unless they come to their senses. It's a warning to them that this president's going to take action."

Democrats, meanwhile, chided Trump for being cavalier about a topic as sensitive as nuclear weapons.

Taking to Twitter himself, Sen. Bernie Sanders (I-Vt.)

wrote Friday afternoon that "Congress must not allow the Tweeter in Chief to unleash a dangerous and costly nuclear arms race."

Rep. Adam Schiff (D-Calif.) tweeted: "Dear Donald Trump. You're new to this so here's a list of things to tweet about instead of nuclear weapons. 1.) Literally anything."

In an interview, Schiff said that in his view, "this just isn't a way to conduct business, certainly not as president or president-elect. It's dangerous."

[Donald Trump is holding a government casting call: He's seeking 'the look']

Doug Wilson, a former assistant secretary of defense for public affairs in the Obama administration, said it remained unclear to him and many others in the national security establishment what Trump was trying to convey.

"I'm not sure if he's talking about expanding the nuclear arsenal or he's mistaken that for modernizing the

nuclear force," Wilson said.

Wilson said that there can be foreign policy advantages to being unpredictable but that "there is a difference in being strategically unpredictable and foolishly unpredictable." He said it's too early to know in which camp to place Trump.

On a range of other issues during the campaign and in recent weeks, Trump has made statements that his aides have immediately walked back or softened.

In a brief appearance before reporters this week, Trump seemed to suggest that two of his most controversial campaign proposals — to ban foreign Muslims from entering the United States and to register those who are here — had been vindicated by recent terrorist attacks in Europe.

Later, Conway insisted that a ban on Muslims was no longer Trump's plan.

After meeting this week with the chief executives of two of the largest defense contractors, Boeing and Lockheed

Martin, Trump announced on Twitter that he had asked Boeing to price out the cost of an F-18 fighter jet — which could replace the F-35 jet developed by Lockheed Martin due to cost overruns.

The tweet sent Boeing's stock up and Lockheed Martin's stock plummeting — shaving about $1.2 billion off the company's value.

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Some conservatives praised Trump for using his platform to pursue cost savings for taxpayers.

But on foreign affairs in particular, experts warned that Twitter is not the best venue to pursue new policy — even if the aim is disruption.

Thomas Nichols, a U.S. Naval War College professor who is currently writing a book on U.S. nuclear policy, noted that Trump and his staff have now offered multiple explanations for what he meant in his nuclear

weapons tweet.

“It’s worse than not having one explanation,” said Nichols, who said he was speaking in his personal capacity. “If you’re going to change policy, then that requires a kind of steely consistency and a lot of disciplined messaging.”

“We’re all spending a lot of time,” he added, “trying to devise the future of America’s nuclear policy out of 140 characters.”

'Let it be an arms race': Trump appears to double down on nuclear expansion

It was unclear who Trump was directing arms race threats against, but he said he received a letter from Putin calling for ‘collaboration on the international scene’

U.S. President-elect Donald Trump talks to members of the media at Mar-a-Lago estate in Palm Beach. Photograph: Carlos Barria/Reuters

Ed Pilkington and Martin Pengelly in New York

Friday 23 December 2016 17.28 GMT

First published on Friday 23 December 2016 13.39 GMT

The president-elect Donald Trump has stunned nuclear weapons experts by appearing to call for a renewed arms race on his Twitter feed and in a TV interview.

Trump calls on US to 'greatly strengthen and expand' nuclear weapons capability

Read more

“Let it be an arms race,” the president in waiting was reported to have told Mika Brzezinski, co-host of MSNBC’s Morning Joe programme, in an early phone call on Friday.

According to Brzezinski he went on to say: “We will outmatch them at every pass and outlast them all.”

The incendiary comment followed a tweet on Thursday in which Trump threatened to preside over a major ramping up of the US nuclear arsenal.

“The United States must greatly strengthen and expand its nuclear capability until such time as the world comes to its senses regarding nukes,” he wrote.

The volley of remarks had Trump aides scrambling into damage limitation mode, but their efforts were powerless to neutralise the shock waves of alarm and bewilderment provoked by the president-elect’s remarks.

They appeared to fly in the face of 35 years of bipartisan US policy geared towards reducing the number of nuclear weapons around the world. Nuclear arms specialists were quick to cry foul.

“It is irresponsible and reckless for the president elect to be articulating future US nuclear policy in a tweet and on a morning news show,” said Daryl Kimball, executive director of the independent Arms Control Association.

He added: “Just the words have damaging effects. It invokes confusion and can stir hostility among our adversaries.”

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A letter, purportedly from Vladimir Putin, released by the Trump campaign. Photograph: Trump Transition

In tune with many of his Twitter-based pronouncements, Trump's intervention prompted confusion about exactly what he was saying. One issue that remained particularly opaque was whom his threats of a renewed arms race were directed against.

The only world power that can match the 1,800 deployed strategic nuclear weapons the US commands is Russia, whose president Vladimir Putin has been showered with praise by Trump.

On Friday, Trump put out a statement in which he said he had received a "very nice letter from Vladimir Putin" and added: "His thoughts are so correct."

More ominously, the president-elect said: "I hope both sides are able to live up to these thoughts, and we do not have to travel an alternate path."

A copy of a letter dated 15 December accompanied the statement, in the name of Putin and bearing the postal address "Moscow, Kremlin". It was billed as an "unofficial translation" – the identity of the translator was unclear.

Putin supposedly wrote: "I hope that after you assume the position of the President of the United States of America we will be able – by acting in a constructive and pragmatic manner - to take real steps to restore the framework of bilateral cooperation in different areas as well as bring our level of collaboration on the international scene to a qualitatively new level."

It was unclear whether the release of Putin's supposed letter was prompted by an exchange of remarks with Moscow on nuclear weapons. Earlier on Friday, Putin said at a press conference that "if someone is stimulating a nuclear arms race it's not us".

"We don't violate anything," he said. "We are in line with our obligations as to the number of our warheads."

On Thursday, Putin had gone further and said Russia needed to "strengthen the military potential of strategic nuclear forces, especially with missile complexes that can reliably penetrate any existing and prospective missile defence systems".

Trump's unrestrained language stands in sharp contrast with the stance adopted by President Obama over the past eight years.

Though Obama has struggled to deliver on his early promise to oversee a sharp reduction in the US nuclear arsenal, agreeing to a $1tn modernisation program over 30 years for the triad of air, land and sea delivery systems, he has consistently adopted the vocabulary of disarmament.

In 2013, the White House worked with Pentagon chiefs to carry out a detailed review

of the US nuclear capability. It concluded that the country already had a third more strategic weapons than were necessary to ensure nuclear deterrence.

Kimball said the findings of the 2013 review proved that “from a military strategy and security standpoint, there’s absolutely no need to get into any arms race”.

Trump’s comments to MSNBC were revealed by the host Joe Scarborough, who like Brzezinski was presenting the Christmas-themed show while dressed in pyjamas and slippers, sitting in front of a roaring fire.

He said: “Mica asked the president-elect while we had the opportunity … to clarify the tweet yesterday regarding the nuclear arsenal. And the president-elect told you what?”

Mika Brzezinski and Joe Scarborough on Morning Joe Friday. Photograph: MSNBC

“‘Let it be an arms race’,” Brzezinski said. “‘We will outmatch them at every pass.’”

“‘And outlast them all’,” Scarborough added.

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“And outlast them all,” Brzezinski repeated.

“You can put that down as breaking news,” Scarborough said.

Trump’s pick to be the incoming White House press secretary, Sean Spicer, led the damage limitation push.

He told NBC Trump would not allow an arms race, because he would stop other

countries from increasing their stockpiles of nuclear weapons.

“He’s going to ensure that other countries get the message that he’s not going to sit back and allow that,” Spicer said. “And what’s going to happen is they will come to their senses, and we will all be just fine.”

Trump, who also tweeted on Friday morning a complaint about his son Eric being forced to give up charity work over perceptions of selling access to the president-elect and his family, is spending Christmas at his Mar-a-Lago resort in Florida. His main engagement for the day was a round of golf with Tiger Woods.