

# Nuclear weapons: experts alarmed by new Pentagon 'war-fighting' doctrine

US joint chiefs of staff posted then removed paper that suggests nuclear weapons could 'create conditions for decisive results'

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North Korean ballistic missiles. The document said nuclear weapons could 'create conditions for decisive results and the restoration of strategic stability'. Photograph: STR/AFP/Getty Images

The Pentagon believes using nuclear weapons could "create conditions for decisive results and the restoration of strategic stability", according to a new nuclear doctrine adopted by the US joint chiefs of staff last week.

The document, entitled **Nuclear Operations**, was published on 11 June, and was the first such doctrine paper for 14 years. Arms control experts say it marks a shift in US military thinking towards the idea of fighting and winning a nuclear war – which they believe is a highly dangerous mindset.

"Using nuclear weapons could create conditions for decisive results and the restoration of strategic stability," the joint chiefs' document says. "Specifically, the use of a nuclear weapon will fundamentally change the scope of a battle and create conditions that affect how commanders will prevail in conflict."

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At the start of a chapter on nuclear planning and targeting, the document quotes a cold war theorist, Herman Kahn, as saying: "My guess is that nuclear weapons will be used sometime in the next hundred years, but that their use is much more likely to be small and limited than widespread and unconstrained."

Kahn was a controversial figure. He argued that a nuclear war could be "winnable" and is reported to have provided part of the inspiration for Stanley Kubrick's film *Dr Strangelove*.

The Nuclear Operations document was taken down from the Pentagon online site after a week, and is now only available through a restricted access electronic library. But before it was withdrawn it was downloaded by Steven Aftergood, who directs the project on government secrecy for the **Federation of American Scientists**.

A spokesman for the joint chiefs of staff said the document was removed from the publicly accessible defence department website "because it was determined that this publication, as is with other joint staff publications, should be for official use only".

In an emailed statement the spokesman did not say why the document was on the public website for the first week after publication.

Aftergood said the new document "is very much conceived as a war-fighting doctrine – not simply a deterrence doctrine, and that's unsettling".

He pointed out that, as an operational document by the joint chiefs rather than a policy documents, its role is to plan for worst-case scenarios. But Aftergood added: "That kind of thinking itself can be hazardous. It can make that sort of eventuality more likely instead of deterring it."

Alexandra Bell, a former state department arms control official said: "This seems to be another instance of this administration being both tone-deaf and disorganised."

Bell, now senior policy director at the Centre for Arms Control and Non-Proliferation, added: "Posting a document about nuclear operations and then promptly deleting it shows a lack of messaging discipline and a lack of strategy. Further, at a time of rising nuclear tensions, casually postulating about the potential upsides of a nuclear attack is obtuse in the extreme."

The doctrine has been published in the wake of the Trump administration's withdrawal from two nuclear agreements: the 2015 **joint comprehensive programme of action** with Iran, and the 1987 **Intermediate-range Nuclear Forces** treaty with Russia. The administration is also sceptical about a third: the New Start accord that limits US and Russian forces strategic nuclear weapons and delivery systems, which is due to expire in 2021.

## Trump is creating a nuclear threat worse than the cold war

Meanwhile, the US and Russia are engaged in multibillion-dollar nuclear weapon modernisation programmes. As part of the US programme, the Trump administration is developing a low-yield ballistic missile, which arms control advocates have said risks lowering the nuclear threshold, making conceivable that a nuclear war could be "limited", rather than inevitably lead to a global cataclysm.

The last nuclear operations doctrine, published during the George W Bush administration in 2005, also **caused alarm**. It envisaged pre-emptive nuclear strikes and the use of the US nuclear arsenal against all weapons of mass destruction, not just nuclear.

The Obama administration did not publish a nuclear operations doctrine but in its 2010 nuclear posture review it sought to downgrade the role of nuclear weapons in **US military** planning.

It renounced the Bush-era plan to build nuclear "bunker-buster" bombs, and ruled out nuclear attack against non-nuclear-weapon states, but it did not go as far towards disarmament as arms control activists had wanted or expected.