A U.S. Strategy Review Likely To Increase the Risk of Nuclear War

by Carl Osgood

Aug. 15—Recent actions by the President Donald Trump administration have made clear that, whatever the earlier ambiguity of its messaging, the White House intends to establish a new era of American unipolar dominance and to forcibly block the rise of rival powers, in particular Russia and China. The administration is reportedly now weighing a change in U.S. nuclear strategy that would place greater emphasis on tactical weapons in the name of expanding "credible nuclear options"—a shift that would sharply raise the risk of the first use of a nuclear weapon in 81 years. But as the failure of the United States and Israel to defeat Iran has demonstrated, these delusional ambitions are colliding with the physical reality of fifty years of economic and cultural collapse at home. They are doomed to fail—and that failure may prove more dangerous than the intent behind it.

@USWPColby

U.S. Under Secretary of "War" for Policy Elbridge Colby meets Philippine President Ferdinand "Bongbong" Marcos, Jr. in the Presidential Palace in Manila, Philippines, Aug. 10, 2026.

Elbridge Colby, the U.S. Undersecretary of Defense for Policy, is one of the principal drivers behind this effort. Colby discussed the new nuclear strategy at U.S. Strategic Command's 2026 Deterrence Symposium in Omaha, Nebraska on Aug. 5, the day before the 81st anniversary of the U.S. atomic bombing of Hiroshima, Japan in 1945. A few hours before the symposium convened, NBC News published an exclusive report claiming that the new strategy Colby is drafting is designed to address scenarios in which U.S. allies come under attack from Russia or China in a regional conflict. "Our view is that we need credible nuclear options," an unnamed Department

U.S. Navy Photo

An unarmed Trident II D5 missile launches from the Ohio-class ballistic missile submarine Nebraska *off the coast of California, March 26, 2008.*

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of Defense official told the network. The strategy would not restrict Donald Trump's choices but instead "expand the president's option space by providing him with realistic and credible options and therefore strengthen deterrence," the official said. In Colby's view, a strategic nuclear response is not a "credible" option in a "regional" conflict. In other words, traditional nuclear weapons are too risky to use, but small, "tactical" nuclear weapons may have a role in modern warfare.

Evidently only a few reporters were allowed into the two-day event, and, as far as this news service can determine, Strategic Command has released no video. However, other attendees and reports have emerged that help to illuminate more of what was under discussion. Hans Kristensen, the director of the Federation of American Scientists' Nuclear Information Project, said in a series of postings on X that "a more aggressive nuclear vision focused on strengthened deterrence and production" was "front and center" at the symposium. Colby, he said in another posting, didn't provide specifics on his review, only "broad strokes." "It's a review or re-look at strategic guidance to create more strike options, not strategic versus tactical, but will utilize and drive capabilities for limited regional scenarios," he said.

Colby repeatedly spoke about giving "options" to the President but stressed that as of right now, he had "no announcement of any kind of change" regarding the Pentagon's nuclear policy, according to Breaking Defense, basing its report on an audio recording of Colby's speech that it said it had obtained. "There's, you know, a review or sort of re-look at the [nuclear] employment guidance, which is more about the commander of STRATCOM [Strategic Command] and his responsibilities and [the defense] secretary's authorities, etcetera," he said. The most recent nuclear employment guidance document was produced by President Joe Biden's administration, an unclassified version of which was publicly released in November of 2024.

Colby broadly touched on the topic of regional wars and a growing focus on smaller, tactical nuclear weapons as a way, supposedly, to limit mass destruction. The United States, he reportedly said, needs more "rational nuclear options" to respond. "What I would fear more" than a "mass attack" on the U.S., he said, "is a regional war … kind of local war, a conventional war that might have local employment, God forbid, of [nuclear] weapons that could escalate from there."

Adm. Richard Correll, in a separate call with reporters, declined to comment on internal Pentagon deliberations, but stressed that the United States has not changed its declaratory policy when it comes to nuclear and strategic capabilities. The department is looking at ways of "expanding options" available to the President, he said, and of providing the "decision space for any conceivable escalation scenario."

An Insanely Dangerous Escalation

But is a nuclear weapon ever a "credible option," especially if the target is a country that is also a nuclear power? Dr. Theodore Postol, professor emeritus at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology and one

Schiller Institute

Professor Theodore Postol

of the world's foremost experts on nuclear weapons, answered that question with an unambiguous "no" in remarks to the 166th weekly meeting of the International Peace Coalition on Aug. 7. He noted that Schiller Institute founder Helga Zepp-LaRouche had brought up in her remarks "this business of changing American nuclear warfighting doctrine to ignore—and I want to underscore this—to ignore the physical realities of nuclear weapons by arguing that you can fight and win a nuclear war."

"This is not a matter of opinion. This is a matter of fact," Postol stressed. "If you look at the destructive capabilities and the rapid delivery capabilities that the two big nations have, Russia and the United States, you would have to be totally ill-informed and delusionary to believe there was any chance at all of not having complete and uncontrolled escalation. If these

countries get engaged in a nuclear conflict, it would be complete, near-instantaneous escalation to global nuclear war, where thousands and thousands of nuclear weapons would be exchanged. This is a delusionary policy, and, I might add, the Russians will take this very seriously."

Indeed, experts in both Russia and China are taking Colby's proposal very seriously. China's *Global Times*, in a commentary on Colby's nuclear strategy review, warned that any use of nuclear weapons, no matter how small, would trigger retaliation. An unnamed Chinese expert said Washington "is hyping external threats to justify tactical nuclear weapons development, even though such weapons may be technically feasible, while ignoring that any nuclear use would trigger retaliation with catastrophic consequences." The expert added that the underlying aim of the U.S. policy "is to impose strategic deterrence against China, Russia and other nations, constituting blatant nuclear blackmail."

Zhang Junshe, a Chinese military affairs expert, told the *Global Times* that the U.S. shift toward normalizing and making nuclear weapons battlefield ready is highly dangerous. "Such a nuclear strategy may sound appealing, but implementing it would be a path toward self-destruction. This reckless approach, driven by strategic ambitions and military-industrial interests, will not strengthen U.S. deterrence credibility but will only increase the risk of global nuclear conflict and threaten world peace and security," Zhang told *Global Times*.

Also commenting was Dmitri Trenin, president of the Russian International Affairs Council (RIAC), who told *Kommersant* that if Colby's ideas are incorporated into the U.S. nuclear strategy and lead to further deployment of U.S. tactical nuclear weapons in Europe and Asia, tensions between Washington and its adversaries would significantly escalate. "As a result, the security of the United States itself would suffer serious harm. The conflicts in question would cease to be regional and would become global," the RIAC president warned. "Instead of bolstering the security of its allies, America would face an intensified direct threat to itself."

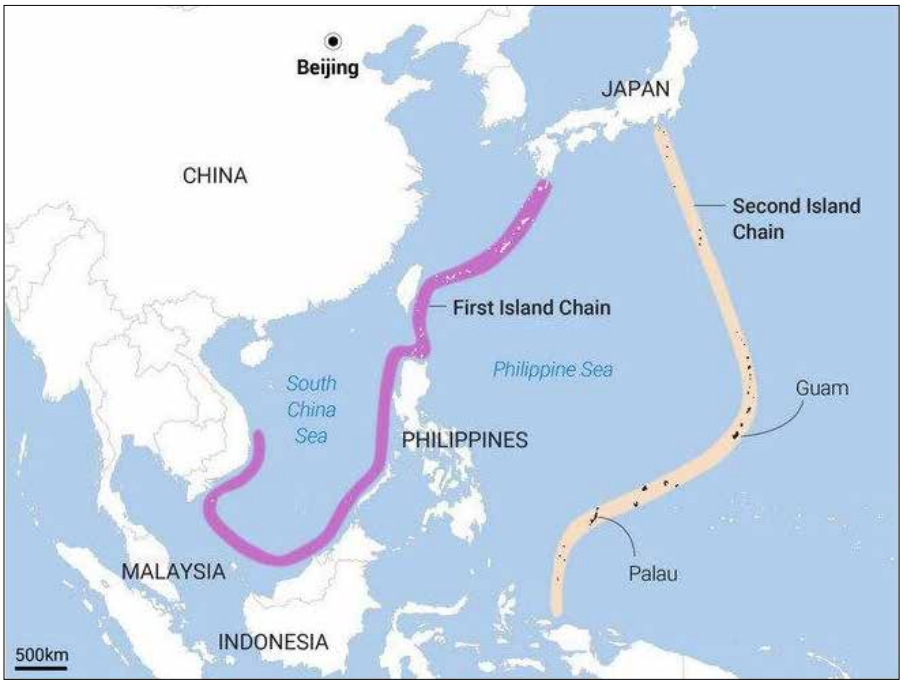
Visions of a New American Empire Wielding its Nuclear 'Big Stick'

The symposium, titled "Peace Through Strength: Turning Defense Strategy into Decisive Deterrence Action," featured a full panoply of speakers involved in the nuclear enterprise, from Trump administration policy makers to military leaders to industry executives, many of whom have a history of advocating for a more aggressive U.S. nuclear strategy. Besides Colby, speakers included Rear Admiral Thomas Buchanan, the director of plans and policy at Stratcom; Dr. Robert Soofer, Deputy Assistant Secretary of Defense for Nuclear Deterrence and Countering Weapons of Mass Destruction; and Christopher Yeaw, Assistant Secretary of State for Arms Control and Nonproliferation. Buchanan, as readers of *EIR* will recall, said in a speech at the Center for Strategic and International Studies in November 2024 that a nuclear exchange with another nuclear power would be "acceptable" as long as the U.S. came out on top.

Soofer, as a Pentagon official during the first Trump administration, oversaw the writing of the 2018 Nuclear Posture Review. That document also advocated for an expansion of the deployment of low-yield tactical nuclear weapons. It gave us the low-yield W76-2 warhead deployed on the Navy's Trident submarine-launched nuclear ballistic missile and initiated development of the Nuclear-armed Sea Launched Cruise Missile, known as SLCM-N, which the Navy is studying for deployment on Virginia-class attack submarines. Both of these weapons were justified as giving the President additional "options" for nuclear use at that time.

Yeaw, a scion of the Hudson Institute, delivered a speech at that same institute in February of 2026, in which he claimed that Russia and China had both conducted secret nuclear tests, an accusation that he repeated in Omaha on Aug. 6. "We had undeniable evidence of a covert Chinese yield-producing nuclear explosive test" in 2020, Yeaw claimed, adding that open-source estimates placed the yield at roughly 10 tons and that U.S. officials are aware of Chinese planning for tests "up to hundreds of tons." Thomas DiNanno, the Undersecretary of State for Arms Control and International Security, first made the allegation at the Conference on Disarmament in February of this year. The U.S. accusation is clearly aimed at the Comprehensive Test Ban Treaty (CTBT), which the United States signed in the 1990s but never ratified, as well as the informal testing moratorium which has been in effect among the original five nuclear powers since then.

Island Chain Strategy



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The First Island Chain forms a strategic arc of islands bordering China's eastern maritime approaches.

President Trump had announced on social media last October that he had ordered a resumption of U.S. nuclear testing. "Because of other countries [*sic*] testing programs, I have instructed the Department of War to start testing our Nuclear Weapons on an equal basis," he said at the time in a post on Truth Social. "That process will begin immediately."

Beyond the nuclear strategy itself, however, the symposium is likely part of the administration's effort to outline a radical policy change, away from what Colby a few days later called "the fanciful era of post–Cold War talking shop NATO," and to instead "return to the tradition of the hard-nosed Atlantic Alliance of the Cold War period." Speaking at the Stratbase Institute in Manila, Philippines on Aug. 10, Colby laid bare the administration's intent to establish a new Pax Americana, with a particular focus on the Pacific. America is "not leaving" Asia, Colby said; "in fact, we are digging in." He went on to describe a new alliance of nations under U.S. direction with the stated purpose of preventing a "hegemon" in Asia—a clear reference to China and Russia. "America's interests are more engaged than ever in the Indo-Pacific, and … we at the Department of War are concentrated on ensuring those interests are stoutly defended. This means a strong and growing U.S. investment in the region," Colby said.

Referencing the administration's National Security Strategy released last November, he said that the U.S.'s "driving and abiding purpose is to maintain a favorable balance of power in the Indo-Pacific," and that this requires "a posture of deterrence by denial along the first island chain." The first island chain is a concept often used to describe the geopolitical containment of China, utilizing the chain of islands stretching from Japan to Taiwan to the Philippines.

Colby's remarks essentially confirm how the United States is moving to install NATO in the Pacific and strengthen military logistics for purposes of increased "deterrence." He concluded his remarks by recalling the imperial outlook of the Teddy Roosevelt administration: "We will mean what we say, and say what we mean. We will not engage in peacocking or moralizing speeches. We will continue to speak softly. But we will continue to carry the world's biggest stick. We will maintain our peerless and formidable strength here in the world's key region."

Stewart Battle contributed to this article.