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Obama set to reject 'nuclear posture' on eve of Start deal with Russia

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President Obama will rewrite America's policy on nuclear weapons next week, heralding further reductions in the US stockpile and giving a pledge not to develop new systems.

Pentagon Correspondent, The Times,
April 2, 2010

After a review of the nation's nuclear weapons arsenal that has involved, among others, the Pentagon, the Department of Energy and the intelligence services, as well as the White House, Mr Obama is expected to reject the doctrine on nuclear weapons - the "nuclear posture" - adopted by George W. Bush, which included the possibility of the United States launching an attack on a non-nuclear state.

The Obama Administration has come under pressure from arms control analysts to redefine the circumstances in which the US might consider using nuclear weapons, and to state beyond doubt that the justification for keeping them is purely as a deterrent.

After the President's speech in Prague last April, when he laid out his personal vision of a world without nuclear weapons, the US has been carrying out a review of its nuclear posture and the conclusions are due to be published in a declassified version early next week - before Mr Obama flies back to Prague to sign the new Strategic Arms Reduction Treaty (Start) with President Medvedev of Russia on April 8.
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President Bush tried but failed to persuade Congress to finance a new programme to develop more advanced "bunker-busting" nuclear bombs, as well as to design new atomic warheads. Now Mr Obama is expected to rule out the development of new weapons systems - despite reservations from the military, which is mindful that Russia and China are modernising and expanding their nuclear forces respectively. He will also drop the notion, espoused by his predecessor, that nuclear warheads can be deployed in certain circumstances; for example, if another country resorts to attacking US forces with chemical or biological weapons.

Daryl Kimball, executive director of the Arms Control Association in Washington, said that if Mr Obama redefined nuclear arms as purely weapons of deterrence, it would "eliminate the number of potential targets the US military think they need to hit". It would also reduce the number of nuclear weapons the US believes it needs, he said, which could bring the total well below the 1,550 strategic warheads agreed under the new Start treaty announced last week.

One of the key issues is whether Mr Obama should agree to make a new declaration that the US will never be the first to use nuclear weapons - no first-use, as it is called. Under Mr Bush the policy was deliberately ambiguous.

The Obama Administration could declare a "negative security assurance", under which the US would pledge never to attack a non-nuclear state with nuclear weapons, provided that they were loyal upholders of the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty (NPT). "That would exclude North Korea and Iran," Mr Kimball said.

In reviewing its nuclear arsenal, the US is considering withdrawing from Europe its last tactical nuclear weapons - 200 B61 gravity bombs - which are based in Belgium, Turkey, Italy, Germany and the Netherlands; all members of Nato. Under a longstanding agreement, the air forces of these countries would be expected to fly their own bombers carrying the American B61 bombs in the event of a conflict in which the US had approved the use of nuclear

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weapons.

A decision on this is not expected to be included in the revised nuclear posture, as it is a matter for discussion within Nato, which is developing an updated strategic concept. However, several countries say they want the nuclear gravity bombs to be withdrawn because there is no longer any justification for keeping them in Europe.

Mr Kimball said: "It's not like the Red Army is going to be coming across Poland and Germany. Conflict between Russia and the US is unfathomable, but the nuclear weapons in Europe give the Russians the cynical excuse not to talk about their own strategy on tactical weapons."

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