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Administration's limits on nukes have limits

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Paul Richter, Tribune Washington Bureau

April 6, 2010 | 3:23 p.m.

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WASHINGTON — President Obama and his senior aides introduced a new nuclear weapons policy Tuesday with the promise that America would no longer build new nuclear weapons. "No new testing, no new warheads," Marine Gen.

James Cartwright, vice chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, pledged in a Pentagon briefing.

Yet, officials explained later that the new policy could allow them to bring back older, tested warhead components and designs to build what would be, for all practical purposes, a new weapon.

The administration's hedge on the warhead issue was but one example of the caution built into a policy portrayed as a groundbreaking effort to reduce U.S. reliance on nuclear weapons.

Although Obama campaigned on a pledge to overhaul nuclear policy, administration officials listened closely to the more conservative advice of Pentagon officials in a year-long study, said people close to the discussions. And they were sensitive to the need to win Republican votes in the Senate for ratification this year of a new arms control treaty with Russia.

The new nuclear weapons policy unveiled Tuesday sets limits on the use of U.S. warheads, declaring some countries off limits even in wartime, as a step toward reducing U.S. reliance on its most destructive weapons.

The new policy came two days before Obama travels to Prague to sign the new arms reduction treaty with Russia and the week before he hosts an international nuclear summit in Washington. At that summit, Obama and China's leader will hold private talks on the sidelines of the conference, officials said Tuesday.

There was strong pressure from arms control advocates for a new U.S. policy that declares that the "sole purpose" of nuclear weapons is to deter others from using them. But the administration stopped short of such a statement to preserve the option of using nuclear weapons to counter a non-nuclear threat.

Instead, officials said their eventual goal was a policy that sets deterrence as the "sole purpose" of nuclear weapons.

There also were expectations that the administration would move toward further shrinking the arsenal by phasing out the estimated 2,000 nuclear weapons kept in storage. But the administration stopped short, saying instead that it hopes to eliminate such stored and battlefield nuclear weapons in a future round of negotiations with Russia.

One of the most visible changes in the new policy was the declaration that nuclear weapons would not be used against non-nuclear countries that complied with the nuclear Nonproliferation Treaty, even if those countries attacked the United States with chemical or biological weapons.

Yet the pledge was accompanied by a caveat that the administration reserves the right to set it

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aside if the destructive level of the attack warranted it.

Release of the review brought quick criticism from some conservative elected officials. Republican Sens. John McCain and Jon Kyl, both of Arizona, said they were concerned that the policy was sacrificing U.S. options. However, other conservatives saw less to worry about.

Henry Sokolski, a senior defense official under former President George H.W. Bush and executive director of the Washington-based Nonproliferation Policy Education Center, said that while the new approach means the United States can no longer target Brazil with nuclear weapons, "we could still use them against Iran, North Korea, China, Russia."

"Bottom line: this new position changes very little," he wrote in an email.

Christopher Preble of the libertarian Cato Institute said the review "wisely clarifies the limited but essential role that nuclear weapons play," but added that it failed to adequately address "a bloated and outdated force structure."

Staff Writer Julian E. Barnes in Washington contributed to this article.

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