A New Nuclear Posture

A year after President Barack Obama set very high expectations with an April 2009 speech in Prague outlining his vision of a world without nuclear weapons, his administration has released its Nuclear Posture Review (NPR), which goes some distance toward meeting Obama’s stated goal of reducing U.S. reliance on nuclear weapons.

Perhaps more importantly, the NPR, made public in its entirety, places U.S. nuclear policy within a conceptual framework based on two important ideas. First, the United States has a compelling interest in preventing any use of nuclear weapons. Second, preventing the use of nuclear weapons requires cooperation as much as, if not more than, it requires deterrence. This is a profound change.

The NPR asserts that “[i]t is in the U.S. interest and that of all other nations that the nearly 65-year record of nuclear non-use be extended forever.”[1] Moreover, instead of listing the many dangers that the potential U.S. use of nuclear weapons may deter, the NPR warns that the greatest danger of nuclear use comes from suicidal terrorists or unfriendly regimes such as North Korea and Iran. Implicitly, the NPR recognizes the threat of nuclear weapons use as a common danger that compels the United States to cooperate, even with potential adversaries.

The NPR flatly states that the United States must align its nuclear policies and posture to meet these urgent priorities. In particular, the NPR concludes that the United States can contribute most effectively to these objectives by reducing both the size of its nuclear forces and its reliance on nuclear weapons. The NPR rejects the notion that the United States can most effectively prevent proliferation by maintaining a robust nuclear arsenal and seeking to make credible the threat to use nuclear weapons in a variety of situations. Critics will seize on the obvious fact that Iran and North Korea are unlikely to abandon their nuclear programs simply because the United States reduces its reliance on nuclear weapons. Yet, this view overlooks the fundamental realization that the United States can prevent proliferation only with the cooperation of other countries—cooperation that does require that the United States demonstrate that, consistent with its obligations under the nuclear Nonproliferation Treaty (NPT), it is reducing its nuclear forces and its reliance on nuclear weapons.

The NPR also states that “[t]he fundamental role of U.S. nuclear weapons, which will continue as long as nuclear weapons exist, is to deter nuclear attack on the United States, our allies, and partners.”[2]

Arms control advocates, including this author, have argued that what the United States says about the purpose of its nuclear weapons should reflect the fact that the use of nuclear weapons is not in the country’s national interest. For many years, they hoped a more sensible U.S. declaratory policy would state that the United States would not use nuclear weapons except in response to a nuclear attack.

Recognizing the political and diplomatic baggage associated with a so-called no-first-use pledge, many of these advocates urged the administration at least to make clear that it maintained nuclear weapons for the “sole purpose” of deterring their use by others, while declining to speculate on hypothetical scenarios in which nuclear weapons might be used. The text of the document makes clear that this option was considered. In the end, the Obama administration asserted that “[t]he United States will continue to strengthen conventional capabilities and reduce the role of nuclear
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weapons in deterring non-nuclear attacks, with the objective of making deterrence of nuclear attack on the United States or our allies or partners the sole purpose of U.S. nuclear weapons.”[3] Thus, for the first time, the United States has established the goal of aligning its declaratory policy with its broad interest in the nonuse of nuclear weapons.

Rejecting Nuclear Ambiguity

The administration took two other important steps in moving declaratory policy away from the calculated ambiguity that was at odds with the U.S. interest in the nonuse of nuclear weapons.

First, the administration finally issued a “clean” negative security assurance, asserting that “[t]he United States will not use or threaten to use nuclear weapons against non-nuclear weapons states that are party to the NPT and in compliance with their nuclear non-proliferation obligations.”[4] Non-nuclear-weapon states that faithfully adhere to the NPT were surely entitled to such a pledge from the start. How can the United States ask other states to sign a treaty that prohibits them from possessing nuclear weapons, while also exposing them to nuclear weapons threats by those who are permitted them?

Some press reports have interpreted this as a new threat against Iran and North Korea. It is not a new threat in any sense. Every previous administration has made this “threat” against every adherent to the NPT. What Iran and North Korea have been given is a clear choice: come into compliance with the NPT in exchange for immunity from nuclear attack or remain outside and at risk. The NPR goes one important step further by delimiting the circumstances in which the United States would consider using nuclear weapons against states that either have nuclear weapons or are working toward them. It says that the United States would only consider the use of nuclear weapons “in extreme circumstances” to defend “vital interests.”[5] The United States no longer intends to use nuclear weapons whenever it is convenient, but only reserves the right to decide to do so in extraordinary circumstances.

In addition to issues relating to declaratory policy, the debate within the administration focused on how to maintain a safe, secure, and effective nuclear arsenal while meeting Obama’s objectives of reducing the number of nuclear weapons and their role in U.S. policy so as to advance the country’s nonproliferation objectives.

Although the NPR, to the disappointment of many, commits to substantial expenditures on the nuclear weapons stockpile and infrastructure, in terms of doctrine and policy it sets out a policy fully consistent with Obama’s goals. The NPR announced three very firm nos. First, it says flatly and without qualification that “[t]he United States will not conduct nuclear testing.”[6] It goes on to call for Senate consent to ratification as well as entry into force of the Comprehensive Test Ban Treaty (CTBT), which means persuading many other recalcitrant countries to adhere to the treaty. The second no is that the United States will not “develop new nuclear warheads.”[7] Again, there is no equivocation, and the NPR says that the program to maintain a safe and effective nuclear arsenal will use only previously tested designs. The NPR also expresses a strong preference for refurbishment or reuse of an existing configuration: “Replacement of nuclear components would be undertaken only if...goals [of the program] could not be met, and if specifically authorized by the President and approved by Congress.”[8] Such replacement would have to be with a plutonium pit that had been tested for another purpose. The third no is that the program will not be aimed at developing new military missions or provide for new military capabilities.

The NPR promises that this approach will permit substantial reductions in the U.S. stockpile of nondeployed weapons. These weapons are now maintained as a hedge against technical failures or a change in the international situation that required a larger deployed force. A more robust research effort would provide a substitute hedge for both of these purposes. The NPR does not provide any specific numbers for either the existing nondeployed stockpile or for the number or timing of the proposed reductions. The administration made a decision at the outset to write only one version of the NPR and to release it in its entirety. There was apparently an intense debate at the last moment about whether these numbers could be declassified and included in the report. The review of this question continues, and one can only hope that Obama’s commitment to transparency, which strongly influenced this entire effort, will prevail here as well.
A robust commitment to maintaining a safe, secure, and effective arsenal within these very clear policy guidelines does not interfere in any way with U.S. nonproliferation efforts or a reduced reliance on nuclear weapons. It is also, practically speaking, a necessary precondition for Senate consent to ratification of the CTBT. The administration now appears confident that the New Strategic Arms Reduction Treaty (New START) will be ratified, perhaps even this year, and with an overwhelming vote. Because New START is a modest step, following in every important detail the recommendations of the bipartisan Perry-Schlesinger Commission,[9] on which the author served, the Senate should overwhelmingly support the treaty. There will certainly not be the same level of Senate support for the CTBT, which split the commission. Securing a bipartisan supermajority in the Senate for ratification will require, along with other steps, persuading key senators that the administration is serious about the modernization of the nuclear complex and that Congress as a whole is prepared to provide the funding.

The decisions on declaratory policy and stockpile management now appear to enjoy the firm support of the departments of Defense, Energy, and State, as well as the Joint Chiefs of Staff and the nuclear weapons complex. The administration also consulted actively with key allies in the process. In doing so, it seems to have come to understand that Germany and Japan, often cited as the countries most concerned about extended deterrence, were comfortable with the changes announced by the NPR and would have supported more far-reaching changes. These discussions led to the decision to retire the TLAM-N nuclear cruise missile and to leave open for NATO discussions the role of U.S. tactical nuclear weapons forward-deployed in Europe. These consultations also revealed that the South Koreans, as well as newer NATO members such as Poland, continue to have lingering concerns about more dramatic changes, such as a no-first-use policy. The key to maintaining momentum for the Prague agenda will be to reinvigorate NATO’s conventional planning while educating key participants in all of these nations, in both official and track two conversations, about the limited role that nuclear weapons can and should play in their defense.

Disappointments

The most disappointing part of the NPR is the section dealing with decisions about the size of the deployed force and the continued reliance on a version of mutual assured destruction as the basis for determining force size and posture. The business-as-usual approach resulted in part from the way that the NPR was conducted. In order to permit the negotiations with the Russians to begin early in the administration, and to do so without opening itself to the charge that it was negotiating before completing its own review, the Pentagon was instructed to do an early minireview that focused on the issues relevant to the New START negotiators. To do this quickly and without intense dispute, the minireview proceeded on the basis of existing guidance from the Bush administration. The strategy worked in the sense that the reductions consistent with that guidance were more than sufficient for the modest changes envisioned in New START.

Further reductions, however, will require significant follow-on study and new presidential guidance that could take years to complete. With the treaty text settled and the NPR released, the administration must now undertake a variety of actions, including “[c]omple[ting] the Presidentially-directed review of post-New START arms control objectives, to establish goals for future reductions in nuclear weapons, as well as evaluating additional options to increase warning and decision time, and to further reduce the risks of false warning or misjudgments relating to nuclear use.”[10]

The NPR rightly rejected the idea of de-alerting forces now because of the difficulty of doing so in any meaningful way with the existing forces and the current presidential guidance, which does not seem to have been reviewed as part of the NPR process. The agreed numbers in New START were dictated by and will enable the military to meet the requirements imposed by the presidential guidance. This requires the force to be able to survive a massive out-of-the-blue Russian attack and promptly deliver a massive strike on a very wide range of targets in Russia with very high confidence that each of the targets will actually be destroyed.

Consistent with the realities spelled out in the NPR, Obama needs to provide the military with new guidance as to what is needed to deter the very, very unlikely, if not impossible, scenario of a massive Russian surprise attack. Obama needs to make it clear that he does not intend to respond
quickly and that there is no requirement for a prompt and massive retaliatory option. Rather he should indicate that high confidence in relatively modest (by war-planning standards) levels of destruction of Russia is sufficient to deter such an unlikely event.

In issuing this guidance, the president should make clear he does not intend to micromanage what retaliatory options with what target sets would be appropriate. Instead, he should seek the design of a force over time that does not rely either on maintaining alert in peacetime or on moving to such a state in a crisis for survivability. Moreover, the president should make it clear to the Russian and Chinese leadership that the United States neither has today nor seeks in the future the capability to negate their deterrents.

Changing the guidance for what is sufficient for deterrence would not by itself determine what size force the United States needs in relation to the Russian nuclear force. However, it would eliminate such calculations from being any obstacle, as it was in the New START negotiations from the U.S. side, in future negotiations on further substantial bilateral reductions with Russia and later multilateral reductions with all of the existing nuclear powers. In addition, it would make possible a more considered conversation of how far the United States could reduce its stockpile in the absence of further agreements with Russia.

The NPR pays homage to Obama’s commitment to seeking a world without nuclear weapons. Verbal commitment to that goal plays a positive role in maintaining support for the NPT regime, and it encourages efforts to reduce reliance on nuclear weapons until their sole purpose is deterring nuclear attacks. A better lodestar for fundamentally rethinking the U.S. nuclear force posture is the set of tasks set out in the NPR for the short term. These include moving toward universal no-first-use and a force posture that is designed to survive any possible attack and poses no threat to the nuclear forces of potential adversaries. This would permit the United States to reduce its total stockpile of nuclear weapons far below 1,000 total warheads. That is a goal that can be reached in Obama’s lifetime and that would significantly reduce the risk of nuclear use by a terrorist or any government and would help to prevent further nuclear proliferation.

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ENDNOTES


2. Ibid., p. 15.

3. Ibid., p. 17.

4. Ibid.

5. Ibid., p. 16.

6. Ibid., p. 38.

7. Ibid., p. 39.

8. Ibid.


10. NPR, p. 47.

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