



Nuclear Battleground: Debating the US 2018 Nuclear Posture Review

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Summary

This Policy Brief compares and contrasts the Trump administration's 2018 Nuclear Posture Review with past reviews and its Obama predecessor. It concludes that this review offers a much harsher assessment of the security environment; it posits a more expansive role for nuclear weapons; and proposes a substantial de-emphasis on arms control. In tone and direction, the 2018 NPR signals a nuclear environment that is more menacing and more competitive, less regulated by negotiated agreement, and marked more by modernization than by reductions in forces. It focuses too much attention on Russian threats, sees weaknesses in the US deterrence posture and believes that deterrence will be bolstered by providing the president with additional usable nuclear options. While there are continuities between this NPR and earlier ones what makes this one particularly worrying is the incumbent Commander in Chief who seeks to blur past distinctions between conventional and nuclear forces.

1. The release of the Trump Administration's Nuclear Posture Review (NPR) has prompted a profusion of contradictory commentary that varies according one's views of the Trump Administration and of nuclear weapons policy. Some insist that the NPR reflects considerable continuity with the past while making appropriate adjustments to meet the requirements of deterrence in present strategic circumstances. Long-time defense official Frank Miller, for example, offers that "The Nuclear Posture Review is squarely in the mainstream of traditional US deterrence policy."¹ Similarly, former George W. Bush Administration Defense Department official Robert Joseph suggests that the 2018 NPR "reflects a remarkable consistency with past US Nuclear Policy."² Michaela Dodge, an analyst at the conservative think tank, The Heritage Foundation, writes that "The Nuclear Posture Review is a step in the right direction wholly consistent with a bipartisan consensus on US nuclear weapons policy post Russia's 2014 invasion of Ukraine."³ In this narrative, the Trump Nuclear Posture Review is largely business as usual, an uncontroversial extension of the long-standing

¹ "Reviewing the Nuclear Posture Review: Here's What You Need to Know," *The Atlantic Council*, February 2, 2018.

² Robert Joseph, "Trump Nuclear Posture Outlines Reasoned Steps to Ensure Deterrence After Years of Neglect," *The Hill*, February 6, 2018.

³ Michaela Dodge and Denitsa Nikolova, "Five Myths About the Nuclear Posture Review," The Heritage Foundation, *Daily Signal*, February 2, 2018.

American approach to deterrence and nuclear policy.

2. The NPR is seen by others, however, as a considerable deviation from the past, introducing worrisome or dangerous elements into US nuclear weapons policy. According to Lisbeth Gronlund of the Union of Concerned Scientists, for example, the Trump NPR “is a pretty sharp departure from current policy or even pre-Obama policies. President Trump is embarking on a reckless path – one that will reduce US security both now and in the longer term.”⁴ Republican defense expert and former defense official Lawrence Korb writes of the widespread belief that the NPR “would reverse almost half a century of progress toward lowering the prospect of a nuclear conflict and actually provoke a new arms race.”⁵ One of Trump’s harshest critics, journalist Matt Taibbi, writes of the NPR that “It’s every bit as bad as could be expected.”⁶ In the narrative of the critics, the Trump NPR has abandoned desirable and stabilizing features of US nuclear policy, such as arms control, and adopted policies and doctrines that increase the likelihood of nuclear war and risk provoking a new arms race.

Context and Meaning

3. Nuclear posture reviews do not drop from the heavens in pristine isolation but are colored by the context in which they emerge. President Obama’s 2010 NPR, for example, was viewed in the context of his April 5, 2009 speech in Prague in which, to wide international acclaim, he emphatically and explicitly committed the United States to the long-term goal of eliminating nuclear weapons, in conformity with the obligation undertaken in Article VI of the Nuclear Non-proliferation Treaty (NPT). Obama further aimed to reduce the role of nuclear weapons in American security policy, expressed a desired to

achieve further reductions in nuclear forces, energetically sought a new strategic arms control agreement with Russia, more generally framed his nuclear policies in an arms control context, pledged to seek the ratification of the Comprehensive Test Ban Treaty, and postulated a very small and narrowly focused range of circumstances in which nuclear weapons might be used. In its nuclear policies, the Obama Administration conveyed a tone of restraint and sobriety and a commitment to respect arms control that was reflected in and shaped perceptions of the 2010 NPR despite Obama’s commitment to a robust nuclear deterrent and his substantial investment in nuclear modernization. Indeed, the positions Obama staked out on nuclear issues, in stark contrast to the more bellicose policies of the George W. Bush administration, were a major factor that led to the awarding of the Nobel Peace Prize to President Obama in 2009.

4. Reactions to the Trump Administration’s NPR have been similarly framed by the rhetoric and the behavior on display since the administration took office. Once again, there is a stark contrast with the Obama Administration. Far from reassuring the world about United States nuclear policies and behavior, President Trump and his administration have combined alarming rhetoric with aggressive policy instincts. President Trump himself has created an outspoken record of confused, uninformed, sometimes befuddling utterances and brash denunciations of established policies. Shortly after taking office, for example, in his first (and only) press conference, Trump stumbled into his first presidential comment on nuclear weapons in the course of bashing his opponent Hillary Clinton over the false claim that as Secretary of State she had played a decisive role in arranging Russian investment in the US uranium industry:

“We had Hillary Clinton give Russia 20 percent of the uranium in our country. You know what

⁴ Gronlund as quoted in Jeff Daniels, “Trump’s Nuclear Posture Review Shows Greater Willingness to Use Nukes First, Say Critics,” CNBC.com, February 2, 2018.

⁵ Lawrence Korb, “Why Congress Should Refuse to Fund the NPR’s New Nuclear Weapons,” *Bulletin of Atomic Scientists*,

February 7, 2018.

⁶ Matt Taibbi, “Donald Trump’s Thinking on Nukes is Insane and Ignorant,” *Rolling Stone*, February 9, 2018.

uranium is, right? This thing called nuclear weapons like lots of things are done with uranium including some bad things.”

Later in the same press conference, he followed up this rather peculiar comment with an additional nuclear reference. Speaking of US relations with Russia, he said:

“We’re a very powerful nuclear country and so are they. I have been briefed. And I can tell you one thing about a briefing that we’re allowed to say because anybody that ever read the most basic book can say it, nuclear holocaust would be like no other.”⁷

These inarticulate improvisations do not suggest a Commander in Chief with a confidence-inspiring grip on nuclear issues.

5. But further, in subsequent statements and policies, Trump has revealed dramatically different preferences for the direction of nuclear policy and different attitudes about the use and utility of nuclear weapons. From the outset of his administration, he has emphasized the large-scale expansion US military capabilities: “I’ve ordered a plan to begin building for the massive rebuilding of the United States military,” he stated at his first press conference. At a briefing on the US nuclear arsenal in the summer of 2017, President Trump was dissatisfied that the US stockpile of nuclear weapons has declined so substantially from its Cold War highs and told senior US military leaders that he would rather see the United States nuclear inventory at its Cold War peak – which was in excess of 30,000 nuclear weapons, over seven times the current arsenal.⁸ This would be a startling reversal of more than a quarter of a century of reductions. Restoring peak Cold War numbers of nuclear weapons is not a realistic option, not least because existing treaty limits do not permit a large expansion of the force, but in its first year in office the Trump Administration has abandoned

the quest for further reductions and made preparations to expand the US nuclear arsenal. As one analysis of Trump’s nuclear policy reports, “The United States has dramatically stepped up the effort to overhaul the existing arsenal and prepare for the day when it might once again be enlarged.”⁹

6. While inclined to dramatically increase numbers of US nuclear weapons, Trump has been consistently negative about and opposed to the arms control agreements he inherited from his predecessor. Accounts of his January 2017 phone call with Russian President Vladimir Putin indicate that Trump was not entirely sure what the New START strategic arms control agreement was but he nevertheless “angrily denounced” the agreement and told Putin that he is not interested in extending it.¹⁰ There are at present no signs of negotiation for a follow-on agreement, so Trump’s position would imply the end of strategic arms control when New START expires in 2021. While apparently skeptical of bilateral arms control with Russia, Trump has also repeatedly attacked the 2015 Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA) that constrains Iran’s nuclear program and that allowed the Iran nuclear crisis to abate; in a speech before the world at the UN General Assembly in 2017, for example, Trump commented that “the Iran deal was one of the worst and most-one sided transactions the United States has ever entered into. Frankly, that deal is an embarrassment to the United States, and I don’t believe you’ve heard the last of it – believe me.”¹¹ . On May 8, 2018, Trump followed through on his threat, announcing that the United States was withdrawing from the JCPOA and was launching the harshest possible campaign of sanctions against Iran. This was done despite repeated affirmations by the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA) that Iran was in full compliance with the agreement; it

⁷ Both quotes are from “Full Transcript, Trump News Conference,” *New York Times*, February 16, 2017.

⁸ “Trump Wanted Tenfold Increase in Nuclear Arsenal, Surprising Military,” CNBC, October 11, 2018.

⁹ David Sanger and William J. Broad, “As US Demands Nuclear Disarmament, It Moves to Expand its Own Arsenal,”

New York Times, May 14, 2018.

¹⁰ “Trump denounced nuclear arms treaty in phone call with Putin,” *The Guardian*, February 10, 2017.

¹¹ “Trump Signals End of Iran Nuclear Deal by Calling it an Embarrassment in UN Speech,” *Washington Examiner*, September 19, 2017.

was done in defiance of the preferences of the other parties to this multilateral instrument; it was done against the wishes of most of America's European allies; and it was done contrary to the advice of a number of Trump's own senior advisors. Trump rejected an agreement that seemed to most observers to be working surprisingly well and instead enthusiastically embraced a brashly confrontational path.

7. Trump's evident distaste for arms control has been accompanied by strikingly bellicose rhetoric toward rivals like Iran and North Korea and thinly veiled nuclear threats, particularly toward Pyongyang. North Korean threats, Trump has famously said, "will be met with fire and fury" the likes of which the world has never seen.¹² More explicitly, he has proclaimed that he will "totally destroy" North Korea if war comes.¹³ Trump, the self-proclaimed deal-maker, has pursued a coercive strategy of maximum pressure designed to intimidate rivals into backing down and making better deals; saber-rattling appears to be an integral component of the Trump approach, despite concerns that it increases the risk of war. Obviously, coercion provides leverage only when threats are credible, but as Taibbi has written, Trump has "constantly hyped himself as someone so crazy and unpredictable he might just use nuclear weapons."¹⁴ When South Korea's President Moon Jae-In mediated a diplomatic opportunity to negotiate directly with North Korean leader Kim Jong Un, Trump immediately concluded that his campaign of threats had worked and reversed course, leaping at the chance to meet with the figure he had been ridiculing as "Little Rocket Man." Whatever comes of a Trump-Kim summit, if one ever occurs, it is not clear that Kim was responding to Trump's threats nor is it reassuring that an American president believes that brandishing nuclear threats is a winning strategy. More generally, Trump's combative style, volatility, and impulsive behavior unnerves friends as well as foes, leading to widespread

concern that his approach has increased the risk of war and raised the prospect of nuclear use. Influential journalist David Remnick laments, for example, that Trump "assumes control of an unimaginably powerful arsenal with no sign of recognizing the gravity of his responsibility."¹⁵

8. The 2018 NPR was released into this wider context in which the tone and temper of the Trump administration on nuclear weapons policy has been prominently on display and in which impressions of the President's nuclear policy instincts have been vividly established. Inevitably, this wider context has had a significant influence on how the NPR has been interpreted. The President's backers, of course, tend to see in the NPR a needed commitment to reinforce, if not restore, America's deterrent posture and a welcome and helpful tougher line against America's increasingly assertive adversaries. But the President's many alarmed critics, including the vast majority of the US arms control community, perceive in the NPR echoes of the President's brash nuclear orientations and fear that it is putting US nuclear policy on an undesirable and potentially dangerous path. The ensuing vigorous debate about the NPR has centered on four broad areas of contention:

- Has the security environment become unprecedentedly menacing, requiring significant US response?
- Do nuclear weapons need to be more usable in order to reinforce deterrence and can this be done without increasing the likelihood of nuclear escalation?
- Are additional force posture capabilities required to provide the President with more usable nuclear options?
- Can and should arms control play a major role in shaping the nuclear environment?

The contours of the nuclear debate triggered by the NPR are provided by the contrary answers to these questions.

¹² "Trump: North Korea Threats will be met with Fire and Fury," BBC, August 8, 2017.

¹³ As quoted in Simon Kuper, "Is War the Next Episode in the Trump Show?," *Financial Times*, April 7-8, 2018.

¹⁴ Matt Taibbi, "Donald Trump's Thinking on Nukes is Insane and Ignorant," *Rolling Stone*, February 9, 2018.

¹⁵ David Remnick, "Donald Trump and the Stress Test of Liberal Democracy," *The New Yorker*, March 19, 2018.

Assessing the Security Environment

9. The 2018 NPR paints a harsh picture of the international security environment to which the United States must respond, a severe characterization that provides the underlying rationale for some of the NPR's controversial measures. The Trump Administration believes it is introducing a needed dose of hard-nosed realism into the nuclear discussion. "We must look reality in the eye," says Secretary of Defense Mattis in his preface to the NPR, "and see the world as it is, not as we wish it to be."¹⁶ And a menacing world it is. As the NPR tells it, there has been a "rapid deterioration" in the security environment and "global conditions have worsened markedly." Hence, the United States now faces "an unprecedented range and mix of threats;" indeed, this represents "a more diverse and advanced nuclear-threat environment than ever before."¹⁷

10. In the NPR's analysis, this reality reflects a failure of past US policies of nuclear restraint and makes it clear that policies suitable for a more benign environment are no longer adequate. The United States has tried to reduce the role of nuclear weapons and has sought to reduce the size of nuclear arsenals, but other powers have not followed suit. Instead we have witnessed what the NPR explicitly describes as "The Return of Great Power Competition." Russia and China are seen as powers challenging the American order: "Russia and China have made clear they seek to substantially revise the post-Cold War international order and norms of behavior." Russia is viewed as particularly troublesome. It has emphasized nuclear weapons in its military doctrine, has shown a willingness to use force, has advantages in nuclear weapons production capacity, has violated arms control commitments, and has undertaken an extensive

nuclear modernization program. Most disturbingly, Moscow is thought to believe that it can gain coercive leverage by threatening or using nuclear weapons against the United States and its allies. Responding to the perception that Russia has adopted a strategy of "escalate to deescalate" which envisions nuclear use as a way to coerce war termination, the NPR warns: "Russia may also rely on threats of limited nuclear first use, or actual first use, to coerce us, or allies, and partners into terminating a conflict on terms favorable to Russia. Moscow apparently believes that the United States is unwilling to respond to Russian employment of tactical nuclear weapons with strategic nuclear weapons."¹⁸

11. This opens up an unfortunate and potentially dangerous gap in the US deterrence posture that must be remedied. Worries about Russia, in short, play a central role in the analysis of the NPR and explain a number of the controversial measures put forward by the Trump Administration. As the *New York Times* proclaimed in its headline on the NPR, "To counter Russia, US Signals Nuclear Arms Are Back in a Big Way."¹⁹

12. Russia is the largest problem identified by the NPR, but China too has launched a considerable nuclear modernization program that "raises questions about its future intent."²⁰ And nuclear threats arise not only in the great power context. Also very much a part of Washington's threat perception is North Korea's growing capability and persistent provocative behavior as well as residual concerns about Iran's nuclear capabilities, notwithstanding the constraints imposed on Iran by the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action. Finally, the 2018 NPR places sustained emphasis on the problem of uncertainty, highlighting that sudden and unexpected geopolitical or technological changes could under-

¹⁶ NPR, p. II (text at <https://media.defense.gov/2018/Feb/02/2001872886/-1/-1/1/2018-NUCLEAR-POSTURE-REVIEW-FINAL-REPORT.PDF>).

¹⁷ NPR, pp. V, 5.

¹⁸ NPR, p. 7.

¹⁹ David Sanger and William Broad, "To Counter Russia, US

Signals Nuclear Arms Are Back in a Big Way, *New York Times*, February 4, 2018.

²⁰ NPR, p. 11.

mine American and allied security. Making allowance for uncertainty requires that the United States invest in flexible and adaptable nuclear capabilities.

13. In short, the NPR suggests that the US must leave behind outdated assumptions about the security environment and adapt US nuclear policy to this new, much more negative reality.

14. Critics complain, however, that the NPR downplays existing formidable US nuclear capabilities and modernization plans while exaggerating the extent to which the threats have increased, thereby creating an excessively pessimistic impression of the security environment. The United States possesses large, sophisticated, survivable, and redundant nuclear forces and is embarked on a comprehensive, long-term, \$1.25 trillion nuclear modernization program. It is simply not the case that rival powers are forging ahead while the United States is standing idly by. The NPR construes what might be regarded as routine modernization by other powers as disturbingly aggressive policies, and pays no heed to the possibility that others are reacting to the nuclear policies and behavior of the United States. Both Russia and China, for example, have stated that some of their nuclear decisions are driven by the need to respond to the US missile defense program.

15. The most fundamental critique of the NPR's threat assessment, however, is that it mischaracterizes the policies and doctrines of the major potential adversaries and therefore rests on false premises. The NPR's characterization of the Russian threat, central to its analysis, is thought to be particularly off-target. There is little evidence, critics argue, to suggest that Russia has adopted a doctrine of "escalate to deescalate" or has otherwise lowered the threshold for nuclear use.²¹ Russian experts insist that Russian

doctrine has been largely unchanged for years except insofar as growing conventional capabilities have allowed Moscow to become less reliant on nuclear weapons; the notion of escalate to de-escalate, they say, is nowhere to be found in actual Russian doctrine.²² As one careful analysis summarizes,

"Not a single Russian open source or official source has confirmed that the so-called "escalate to de-escalate" concept is Russian policy. Western analysts and subject matter experts continue to express doubts as to whether this is a correct representation of Russia's strategy. Despite this fact, U.S. officialdom has clung to the idea that nuclear coercion is a critical component of what the posture review calls "Russia's evolving nuclear doctrine." Particularly flawed is the review's claim that such a strategy hinges on the lack of a U.S. capability to retaliate in kind. This bears no resemblance to the theoretical discussions that do exist on limited nuclear options in Russian military journals."²³

16. The Russian threat, more than anything else, drives the Trump NPR, but its characterization of Russian nuclear behavior is denied by the Russians themselves and contested by Western experts. Those who are not persuaded by the NPR's interpretation of Russia will not find the proposed responses to the Russian threat to be compelling.

17. As with Russia, so with China. Critics simply do not see a significant increase in the threat posed by China's nuclear behavior. Indeed, China has remained committed to a relatively small nuclear force and a retaliatory deterrent doctrine. Though China is modernizing its force, there has been no notable change in its nuclear policy.²⁴ It is not at all clear what it is about China's evolving nuclear capability that has rendered the US nuclear deterrent inadequate or requires some new response from the United States. As former State Department official

²¹ See, for example, Olga Oliker and Andrey Baklitskiy, "The Nuclear Posture Review and Russian 'De-Escalation': A Dangerous Solution to a Nonexistent Problem," *War on the Rocks*, February 20, 2018.

²² A good example is Andrey Baklitskiy, "Flawed Foundations: A Russian Critique of the US Nuclear Posture Review," European Leadership Network, *ELN Commentary*, March 8, 2018.

²³ Kristin Ven Bruusgaard, "The Russian Rogue in the New

Nuclear Posture Review," *Texas National Security Review*, February 13, 2018.

²⁴ See, for example, Ankit Panda, "Trump's Nuclear Posture Review and China: No Way Forward?" *The Diplomat*, February 12, 2018; and "Trump Nuclear Posture Review Overstates China's Nuclear Arsenal Modernization Plans," Union of Concerned Scientists, February 1, 2018.

James Steinberg has commented, “The NPR’s relationship to the China threat is perhaps the most puzzling.”²⁵

18. In the eyes of the critics, reacting (or overreacting) to exaggerated or nonexistent threats will produce not greater security but pressures to engage in an arms race that could escalate both costs and dangers. Thus the lines of the debate: one side sees needed adaptations to an increasingly dangerous world; the other side sees unnecessary reactions to exaggerated threats producing an avoidable and potentially dangerous arms race.²⁶

Deterrence and Nuclear Use

19. Having painted a threatening security environment, the Trump NPR lays out an expansive vision of the role nuclear weapons will play in US security policy. Implicitly joining a long debate about whether nuclear weapons should be limited solely to the purpose of deterring nuclear attack, the NPR states plainly that this is not the case: “Deterring nuclear attack is not the sole purpose of nuclear weapons.”²⁷ Rather, the 2018 NPR is emphatic that US nuclear weapons are meant to deter both nuclear and non-nuclear threats, “including new forms of aggression.”²⁸ While explicitly remaining ambiguous about what scenarios might prompt the United States to use nuclear weapons, it mentions “major conventional, chemical, biological, nuclear, space, and cyber threats...”²⁹ Thus, while retaining the general notion that nuclear weapons would be used only in extreme circumstances, the Trump NPR broadens the scenarios that might qualify as extreme. In addition, while the US deterrence posture has always been meant to protect the United States and its allies, the

2018 NPR also proclaims a need to extend deterrence protection to unspecified “partners.”³⁰ In the new NPR, then, it seems that nuclear weapons are intended to play more deterrent roles and to cover more countries.

20. Given the multiple roles assigned to nuclear weapons, the NPR emphasizes that it is important to improve deterrence across the spectrum and to close any gaps that may exist in the US deterrent posture. Several concerns are addressed. First, deterrence must be “tailored” to each specific opponent; flexible forces and diverse options are necessary to address the unique perceptions and the distinctive decision calculus of each potential opponent. Second, what the NPR labels non-nuclear strategic threats could emanate from non-nuclear weapons state members of the NPT. Those states currently enjoy a security assurance that the US will not use or threaten to use nuclear weapons against them. In the NPR, however, such states are warned that the United States “reserves the right” to “adjust” this assurance should threats emerge that warrant a change of policy; put baldly, the NPR says the United States will use nuclear weapons against any state if this is deemed necessary in light of perceived threats.³¹

21. Third, the NPR expresses particular concern about the threat of nuclear escalation in conventional conflicts and the urgent need to deter limited nuclear first use. (As one acerbic commentator observed, “the US is oddly unsure it can deter weaker adversaries.”³²) Flowing out of the perception that Russia may believe it has coercive advantages at lower levels of nuclear escalation, the Trump Administration concludes

²⁵ James B. Steinberg, “Expanding the Options and Lowering the Threshold for Nuclear Weapons,” *Texas National Security Review*, February 13, 2018.

²⁶ On the risk of a new nuclear arms race, see for example Oliver Thraenert, “President Trump’s Nuclear Posture Review,” *CSS Analyses in Security Policy*, No. 223, Center for Security Studies, ETH (Zurich), March 2018.

²⁷ NPR, p. 20.

²⁸ NPR, p. 21.

²⁹ NPR, p. 21. See also David Sanger and William Broad, “Pentagon Plan Would Expand Nuclear Policy,” *New York*

Times, January 17, 2018; and Paul Sonne, “Pentagon Unveils New Nuclear Weapons Strategy, Ending Obama-Era Push to Reduce US Arsenal,” *Washington Post*, February 2, 2018.

³⁰ NPR, p. 20.

³¹ NPR, p. 21.

³² Matthew Harries, “A Nervous Nuclear Posture Review,” *Survival*, Vol. 60, No. 2 (April-May 2018), pp. 55-57.

that the United States needs the “full range of capabilities and response options” in order to ensure that the President can respond effectively in any circumstance. This entails the creation of usable options at low levels of nuclear escalation and a particular emphasis on the interplay of conventional and nuclear forces:

“US forces will ensure their ability to integrate nuclear and non-nuclear planning and operations. Commands and Service components will be organized and resourced for this mission, and will plan, train, and exercise to integrate US nuclear and non-nuclear forces and operate in the face of adversary nuclear threats and attacks.”³³

In this logic, the threat of limited first use against the United States during a conflict will be met with a greater US ability to engage in escalation at low levels. Usable options will neutralize Russia’s potential coercive advantage.

22. Fourth, the NPR offers that the United States must be able to operate effectively if nuclear deterrence fails. This is thought necessary in part because deterrence will not be credible if the US cannot do so. Further, the NPR argues that if nuclear weapons are used, the ability to restore deterrence – that is, to keep nuclear use limited by deterring further escalation – may be the best way to limit damage in the event of deterrence failure. And finally, in the event that nuclear war comes, the United States will want the ability to limit damage as much as possible through the use of offensive options and defensive capabilities. Addressing such concerns requires attention to the challenge of nuclear warfighting – regarded as necessary if deterrence is to be credible and necessary if deterrence fails.

23. In sum, the Trump NPR outlines expanded roles for nuclear weapons in deterring a wide range of nuclear and non-nuclear threats from nuclear and non-nuclear adversaries. It argues that previous nuclear policies are inadequate to the more menacing world that has emerged and

that weaknesses in the US deterrent must be repaired. It insists that the “full range” of capabilities and options must be provided to the President in service of these ends. All of this is consistent, it is suggested, with long-standing US nuclear deterrent policies.

24. Critics of the NPR have found this line of thinking to be particularly disturbing, especially when viewed in the context of President Trump’s inexperience, impulsiveness and belligerence. Those who believe it is desirable to minimize the role of nuclear weapons and reduce the likelihood of their use are distressed that the Trump Administration appears committed to do the reverse. Critics dissent on at least four major points. First, they reject the premise that the US deterrent posture is in any way inadequate. On the contrary, the United States possesses large, flexible, potent, credible, survivable forces capable of hitting any target in any scenario, large or small. There is no evidence to suggest that some worrisome gap or weakness now exists. Stephen Walt concludes, for example, “As things stand now, nobody really doubts America’s deterrent capability.”³⁴ If America’s existing deterrent posture is sufficient, then the Trump Administration’s innovations are unnecessary and the rationale for many of its controversial choices disappears.

25. Second, many believe that it is desirable to reduce rather than expand the role that nuclear weapons play in American security policy. Such a reduction was an explicit goal of the Obama Administration – recognizing, as Steven Pifer has written, “the limited utility of nuclear weapons in all but the most dire situations....”³⁵ The idea has been to focus the US nuclear arsenal solely on the deterrence of nuclear threats and to rely on America’s enormous non-nuclear capabilities to deal with other contingencies. Further, emphasizing the limited utility of nuclear weapons is thought to be helpful in managing and strengthening the nonproliferation regime;

³³ NPR, p. 21.

³⁴ Stephen M. Walt, “The World Doesn’t Need Any More Nuclear Strategies,” *Foreign Policy*, February 6, 2018.

³⁵ Steven Pifer, “Questions about the Nuclear Posture Review,” *Brookings Institution*, February 5, 2018.

advocating restraint for others while proclaiming the wide usefulness of nuclear weapons is an awkward, if not hypocritical, stance. While the “sole use” doctrine has never been formally adopted, the United States has moved in the direction of identifying tightly circumscribed circumstances in which nuclear weapons might be used. In this, as is so many respects, Trump has gone in the other direction. Former State Department official Thomas Countryman captures perfectly the reaction of many to this change of direction:

“What concerns me most directly is the talk of an expanded role for nuclear weapons. For years, the United States under successive Presidents of both parties has consistently narrowed the circumstances under which an American President would contemplate the use of nuclear weapons. For the first time in a long time, instead there is an expansion, an explicit expansion of the circumstances under which the President would consider such use.”³⁶

For those who share Countryman’s perspective, Trump’s reversal is a disappointing step in the wrong direction.

26. Third, there is great concern that the Trump Administration’s emphasis on usable options and limited nuclear exchanges will lower the threshold for nuclear use, when the wise and desirable course is to raise the threshold for use as high as possible. If the President believes that more usable nuclear weapons and more controllable options are available, crises may become more dangerous and escalation may be more likely in conventional war. Hence the worry that the drafters of the NPR might “put the nation on the slippery slope to nuclear escalation” by giving President Trump “a kind of gateway drug for nuclear war.”³⁷

27. Fourth, the Trump NPR’s emphasis on integrating conventional and nuclear forces in conjunction with a preoccupation with limited nuclear use scenarios will, it is feared, blur the line between conventional and nuclear war. Indeed, it appears to critics that the 2018 NPR “deliberately blurs the line” and “eliminates a clear firewall.”³⁸ In the event that conventional conflict occurs, this blurring could produce escalatory pressures and dynamics that would increase the likelihood that nuclear weapons would be used – or, as Fred Kaplan has warned, “making the escalation to nuclear war more seamless and possibly more tempting.”³⁹ The shadow of possible nuclear use can never be completely eliminated, but a clear line of demarcation between conventional and nuclear operations reduces the risk of preemptive or inadvertent nuclear escalation by an opponent fearful that the war is going nuclear. Critics believe that the NPR’s desire to undermine the firewall will cause a number of adverse consequences and raise potential dangers. For Oliver Meier, for example, “mixing conventional and nuclear deterrence decreases crisis stability and fuels arms races.”⁴⁰ For Dick Zandee and Sico van der Meer, blurring the difference between conventional and nuclear weapons “may endanger the global norm against nuclear weapons use and increase the risks of nuclear warfare because of misunderstanding and miscalculation.”⁴¹ Perhaps it is Andrew Weber who puts the broad point most plainly: introducing weapons that blur the line “will make nuclear war more likely.”⁴²

28. What is evident is that Trump’s NPR has reinvigorated the familiar and long-standing collision between different conceptions of deterrence and competing views about the proper and prudent role for nuclear weapons in US security policy. All favor deterrence, of course, but

³⁶ Countryman spoke at a press briefing organized by the Arms Control Association. See “The Trump Administration’s New Nuclear Posture Review,” *Arms Control Association*, January 23, 2018.

³⁷ Mark Perry, “Trump’s Nuke Plan Raising Alarms Among Military Brass,” *The American Conservative*, February 2, 2018.

³⁸ Lisbeth Gronlund as quoted in Daniels, “Trump’s Nuclear Posture Review Shows Greater Willingness to Use Nukes First, Say Critics.”

³⁹ Kaplan, “Nuclear Posturing,” *Slate*, January 22, 2018.

⁴⁰ Oliver Meier, “The US Nuclear Posture Review and the Future of Nuclear Order,” *European Leadership Network*, March 2, 2018.

⁴¹ Dick Zandee and Sico van der Meer, “Trump’s Nuclear Posture Review: A New Rift Between Europe and the US?” *Clingendael Policy Brief*, Netherlands Institute of International Relations, February 2018.

⁴² Weber, “Trump Wants New Nukes. We Can’t Let Him Have Them,” *Huffington Post*, January 19, 2018.

there are very divergent answers to the questions “What deters?” and “Deterrence of what?” One side in this debate privileges stability and minimizing the risk of nuclear use by restraint and regulation, the other seeks to maximize the credibility of deterrent threats by the maintenance of a flexible arsenal and the pursuit of usable nuclear options. What the NPR demonstrates is that the transition from Obama to Trump has very substantially swung the pendulum from one school of thought to the other. For those who fear the implications of Trump’s strategy, this is a distressing development.

Force Modernization: from Consensus to Controversy

29. There is a wide consensus in Washington that US nuclear forces must be modernized, including both delivery systems and the nuclear weapons complex. There is little disagreement about the broad contours of the arsenal, built around the long-established nuclear triad. The Trump Administration inherited from Obama a comprehensive 30 year, \$1.25 trillion nuclear modernization program that remains at the core of plans to replace and upgrade the current force.⁴³ There is concern about the affordability of this program and debate about priorities within it, but in general there is substantial overlap between the long-term acquisitions envisioned by the Obama Administration and the modernization program pushed forward by the Trump Administration.

30. The 2018 NPR, however, has introduced controversy into this picture. In an effort to give reality to the emphasis on flexible, usable forces, especially at lower levels of escalation, the NPR adds four new items to the modernization program:

- A new nuclear-armed long-range stand-off weapon (LRSO) - an air-launched nuclear-tipped cruise missile

- to augment US bomber forces and improve their ability to penetrate defenses.

- A new sea launched cruise missile (SLCM) to provide regional strike capabilities and to offset Russian violations of the Intermediate Nuclear Forces (INF) treaty.
- A new low-yield nuclear weapon to fill the perceived deterrence gap.
- Plans to deploy low-yield weapons on ballistic missile submarines to provide platforms for regional strike.

31. To proponents of the NPR, these are enhancements of deterrence that follow naturally from the NPR’s threat assessment and from its diagnosis of needed adaptations of the new threat environment. As long-time nuclear policymaker Frank Miller has written, these are “modest but important adjustments to US nuclear forces” that strengthen the US ability to conduct limited strikes in support of “small options” that have been a part of US nuclear war planning for decades.⁴⁴ Anticipating criticisms, the NPR denies that the focus on limited, low-yield, and flexible options will have negative effects: “This is not intended to enable, nor does it enable, ‘nuclear warfighting.’ Nor will it lower the nuclear threshold.”⁴⁵ Instead, it denies escalatory advantage to potential adversaries and thereby raises the nuclear threshold by discouraging the initiation of limited nuclear strikes.

32. To opponents of the NPR, however, these reassurances are unpersuasive; the additions to the modernization program are seen as the operational embodiment of the worrying doctrinal inclinations found in the document. In the eyes of the critics, these steps are not needed: existing and planned forces are adequate and sufficiently flexible, low-yield options already exist, and there is no deterrence gap for which these capabilities are necessary. Those who disagree with the NPR’s threat assessment often fail to see the problem to which these new programs

⁴³ William J. Broad and David Sanger, “Budget Office Projects Cost of Nuclear Upgrade Rising 20% to \$1.2 Trillion,” *New York Times*, November 1, 2017.

⁴⁴ Frank Miller, “Addressing Fears about the Nuclear Posture Review and Limited Nuclear Use,” *War on the Rocks*, February 28, 2018.

⁴⁵ NPR, p. 54.

are the answer. “It is not apparent what regional security problem a nuclear-armed SLCM would solve,” writes Pifer, for example.⁴⁶ Absent compelling rationales, the logic of moving forward down these paths is found wanting. “The review,” concludes Adam Mount, voicing the common view among critics, “does not present a strong case for why these new capabilities are needed. They are weapons in search of a mission.”⁴⁷ Moreover, these extra capabilities add significant costs to a modernization program whose affordability many already doubted.

33. But worse, these moves are thought to be destabilizing. They reflect an undesirable quest for more usable weapons. They blur the nuclear threshold and mix conventional and nuclear assets. Because LRSOs and SLCMs may have high- or low-yield weapons and conventional or nuclear warheads, adversaries will not be able to distinguish between conventional and nuclear strikes or between limited and less limited nuclear attacks. The Trump NPR, in this reasoning, is unduly optimistic about the prospect of controlling escalation in any scenario that involves nuclear use, however limited. Former Assistant Secretary of Defense Andrew Weber writes, for example, that “These new weapons vastly increase the potential for miscalculation and erode the 70-years taboo against using nuclear weapons.”⁴⁸ A similar analysis sees the Trump NPR modernization proposals as a “destabilizing mistake” that has the potential to cause “catastrophic confusion.”⁴⁹

34. Nuclear posture reviews are declaratory documents that mostly spell out attitudes and approaches. It is in force modernization proposals, and associated budgetary impacts, that

NPRs have a tangible effect on force deployments over the long run and hence on operational options. The Trump NPR has added elements to the large existing modernization program that have stirred vigorous debate: these steps are either “modest supplements” that enhance “flexibility and responsiveness” in adapting to a more threatening world, or they are unnecessary, destabilizing, and unaffordable moves that bring the world closer to nuclear war. While the debate proceeds, Congress has begun to take steps to fund Trump’s proposals.⁵⁰

What Role for Arms Control

35. For nearly half a century, since the beginning of serious strategic arms control negotiations in 1970, arms control has occupied a central place in US nuclear weapons policy and, though sometimes controversial, has been viewed as a useful and effective instrument for managing the nuclear order and containing nuclear dangers. In the April 2010 Obama NPR, arms control and restraint were woven through many of the chapters, with an emphasis on reducing both the role and the numbers of nuclear weapons and on cooperation to address pressing nuclear worries and to minimize nuclear risks. The Obama NPR culminated in a final chapter that outlined the many measures the United States was undertaking that would “bring us significant steps closer to the President’s vision of a world without nuclear weapons.”⁵¹ Arms control has been a major factor in shaping nuclear policy and nuclear relationships.

36. Not so in the Trump Administration. As noted, the President has been outspokenly unsupportive of major arms control agreements,

⁴⁶ Pifer, “Questions About the Nuclear Posture Review.”

⁴⁷ Perry, “Trump’s Nuke Plan Raising Alarms Among Military Brass.”

⁴⁸ Andrew C. Weber, “Trump Wants New Nukes. We Can’t Let Him Have Them,” *Huffington Post*, January 19, 2018.

⁴⁹ Tom Z. Collina, “Trump’s New ‘Low-Yield’ Nuclear Weapon: Two Bad Ideas Rolled Into One,” *The National Interest*, March 10, 2018. The phrase “destabilizing mistake” is from a quote attributed to Admiral (Ret.) James Stavridis,

former Supreme Allied Commander in Europe.

⁵⁰ See Sanger and Broad, “As US Demands Nuclear Disarmament, It Moves to Expand its Own Arsenal,” *New York Times*, May 14, 2018.

⁵¹ NPR, p. 48.

criticizing the New START agreement and repudiating the JCPOA. The NPR echoes his skepticism but is not wholly dismissive about the arms control enterprise. The United States will remain open, it says, to agreements “that enhance security, and are verifiable and enforceable” and will be receptive to arms control negotiations “if conditions permit.”⁵² It will continue to implement the New START agreement (though there is no commitment to extend the agreement when it expires in February 2021). Washington remains supportive of nonproliferation efforts, though with an emphasis on the obligations of other states and the need to impose costs on transgressors. The NPR takes what it sees as a sensible stance in favor of “prudent” arms control.

37. Overall, though, the tone is grimly negative. The discussion of arms control and nonproliferation is confined to one meager chapter that seems tacked on at the end of the document. In the abstract, the Trump NPR may favor arms control “if conditions permit,” but it is emphatic that present conditions do not permit progress in arms control; rather, efforts are needed to “reestablish” the necessary relationships with Russia and China. In the current environment, the NPR states, “further progress is difficult to envision.”⁵³ The NPR appropriately raises concerns about Russia’s alleged violations of the INF agreement and other treaties, but sees this not as a problem to be solved or a crisis requiring creative diplomacy, but as a reason to avoid arms control. In this logic, aggressive behavior and compliance issues render other parties (in particular, Russia and Iran today) unfit parties for negotiation: “Concluding further agreements with a state in violation of multiple existing agreements would indicate a lack of consequences for its noncompliance and thereby undermine arms control broadly.”⁵⁴ Without

question it is important to address noncompliance issues, nearly everyone would agree, but the NPR frames the problem in a way that makes it sound like the end of arms control for the foreseeable future. Further, the NPR denounces the UN Nuclear Weapons Ban Treaty, hailed by many around the world as a major accomplishment, as “wholly unrealistic” and “damaging.” It states plainly that the Trump Administration has no intention to ratify the Comprehensive Test Ban Treaty, and provides a somewhat ambiguous pledge not to resume testing “unless necessary.”⁵⁵ (Some fear that the development of Trump’s low-yield weapon may make testing “necessary.”) The broad theme of this discussion is that the security environment is unfavorable for arms control. This is a document that reflects the Trump Administration’s “aversion to arms control.”⁵⁶ The contrast with Obama could hardly be starker.

38. Not surprisingly, the arms control community finds much to criticize in the NPR’s line of argument. For one thing, arms control is an instrument designed to help manage relationships with adversaries, an inherently difficult but valuable task; the worse the relationship, the more relevant and useful arms control could be. The disrepair in relations with Russia is a reason to attempt to utilize arms control, not reject it. “We need to get back to thinking about shaping the environment,” comments former NSC official Jon Wolfsthal, “and not having the environment shape us.”⁵⁷ Instead, critics see numerous errors of omission. There is no Trump arms control agenda outlined in the NPR. Trump’s arms control policy, complains Oliver Meier, is “reactive and unambitious.”⁵⁸ There is little attention to reductions, or stability, or to US disarmament obligations under Article VI of the Nuclear Nonproliferation Treaty (NPT). On the contrary, the NPR lays out what John Bur-

⁵² NPR, pp. 70, 74.

⁵³ NPR, p. 73.

⁵⁴ NPR, p. 74.

⁵⁵ NPR, p. 72.

⁵⁶ The phrase is borrowed from John Burroughs, “Trump’s Nuclear Posture Review: A Call to Nuclear Arms”, *Nuclear*

Disarmament Briefing Paper, The Simons Foundation, February 26, 2018.

⁵⁷ “The Trump Administration’s New Nuclear Posture Review,” *Arms Control Association*, January 23, 2018.

⁵⁸ Meier, “The US Nuclear Posture Review and the Future of Nuclear Order.”

roughs describes as “an anti-disarmament program” that “betrays a lack of good faith... ”⁵⁹ The NPR introduces a new idea when it says that future arms control agreements must be “enforceable,” but critics suspect that this is an impossible-to-meet criterion meant to thwart progress. “The requirement of being enforceable ... is unprecedented in nuclear arms control,” note Zandee and van der Meer, and “it is not clear what it means....”⁶⁰ At every turn, arms controllers find disappointment in the Trump NPR.

39. Arms control proponents fear that broad damage will be done by Trump’s approach to arms control. Combining substantial nuclear modernization programs with fewer arms control constraints seems like a recipe for another arms race, which once commenced may be challenging to contain. Trump’s approach appears to forfeit Washington’s global leadership role in matters of arms control and nonproliferation. The NPR, warns Tom Countryman, “essentially abandons the United States leadership role in nonproliferation and arms control that have marked every President since Dwight Eisenhower.”⁶¹ Other states may attempt to compensate for Washington’s retreat from arms control but, as one European expert suggests, “the policy course set by the NPR will complicate their efforts to salvage the global nuclear nonproliferation and disarmament system.”⁶² Perhaps most fundamentally, over a period of decades a relatively stable global nuclear order evolved, resting on a foundation of negotiated agreements and associated institutions, with the United States as a leading architect of that order. Now, as Oliver Meier has written, the NPR suggests that Washington “does not see arms control at the core of a nuclear order,” which implies that the “days may be ending” when the United States could be relied upon “for main-

taining the institutions that underpin the nuclear order.”⁶³ Arms controllers see wreckage in the wake of the Trump Administration and the damage may not be easy to repair.

Conclusion

40. The record is clear that nuclear posture reviews are not transformative documents. In one of the more insightful analyses of the Trump NPR and its connections with the posture reviews that preceded it, Janne Nolan and Brad Radzinsky conclude, for example, “What is most striking is how little these documents ended up transforming the American nuclear posture.” Force postures, budget allocations, and operational plans matter more but figure little or not at all in posture reviews. Forces change only gradually, and operational doctrine resides with the professional military, whatever the contents of a posture review. What the NPR does offer, however, is a view of the nuclear beliefs of an administration’s high command. How do they view the nuclear order and what role do they see for nuclear weapons? As Nolan and Radzinsky emphasize about the NPR, the ‘document’s primary purpose is to communicate the views of political leaders rather than establish operational requirements.’⁶⁴

41. The 2018 Nuclear Posture Review offers a very clear picture of the inclinations of the Trump Administration. Broadly, there are three notable thematic differences between Trump’s NPR and its Obama predecessor. It offers a much harsher assessment of the security environment; it posits a more expansive role for nuclear weapons; and proposes a substantial de-emphasis on arms control. In tone and direction, the NPR signals a nuclear environment that is more menacing and more competitive, less regulated by negotiated agreement, and marked

⁵⁹ Burroughs, “Trump’s Nuclear Posture Review.”

⁶⁰ Dick Zandee and Sico van der Meer, “Trump’s Nuclear Posture Review: A New Rift Between Europe and the US?” Clingendael Policy Brief, Netherlands Institute of International Relations, February 2018.

⁶¹ “The Trump Administration’s New Nuclear Posture Review,” *Arms Control Association*, January 23, 2018.

⁶² Lukasz Kulesa, “The 2018 US Nuclear Posture Review: A

Headache for Europe,” *European Leadership Network*, February 6, 2018.

⁶³ Meier, “The US Nuclear Posture Review and the Future of Nuclear Order.”

⁶⁴ Janne E. Nolan and Brian Radzinsky, “Policy or Party Platform? Making Sense of the Trump Nuclear Posture Review,” *Texas National Security Review*, February 13, 2018.

more by modernization than by reductions in forces. It places great emphasis on enhancing capabilities to respond to Russia – which brings into view a new arms race.⁶⁵ It sees weaknesses in the US deterrence posture and believes that deterrence will be bolstered by providing the president with additional usable nuclear options.

42. Each of the main points of the 2018 NPR is contested by critics of the document and of the Trump Administration – the latest cycle in the long-running nuclear debate between those committed to a more aggressive and coercive nuclear policy and those who favor a more restrained and cooperative approach to managing the nuclear order. The Trump Administration has without question shifted American policy onto a tougher line, but what may be particularly disconcerting to the critics is less the changing balance of power between these familiar views and more the President with whom the current NPR is associated.

43. Ultimately, the safety and stability of the nuclear order depend more on the experience, the prudence and the judgment of the President than on the contents of the NPR. Trump is more worrisome than the Trump NPR. For many in the current debate, that is the most profound source of concern.

⁶⁵ Aaron Mehta, “Nuclear Posture Review Puts Russia Firmly in the Crosshairs,” *Defense News*, February 2, 2018.

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