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Issue No. 427

February 7, 2018

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### **The New US Nuclear Posture Review: Return to Realism**

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It has become a tradition that every new Administration wants to make its mark on nuclear policy by writing a “Nuclear Posture Review” (NPR). Rarely, however, has a policy document been as eagerly awaited as the NPR initiated by President Donald Trump.<sup>1</sup> Trump’s propensity for Tweets, even on delicate nuclear matters, as well as some of his statements when he was Presidential candidate, made some observers, including in Europe, fear for the worst.

These fears should now be put to rest. The Trump Administration’s new NPR is a remarkably coherent document. Unlike the 2010 NPR initiated by President Obama, which was characterised by a rather optimistic worldview, the 2018 NPR reflects the reality of a different political climate. The world has become a more dangerous place again. Accordingly, the authors of the new NPR make an unabashed case for nuclear deterrence: for the protection of the United States, but also for the protection of US allies.

That the new NPR would draw criticism was to be expected. For anti-nuclear activists and arms control enthusiasts, the 2018 NPR does indeed provide little comfort. The 2010 document had put nuclear arms reductions and non-proliferation at the top of the US nuclear security agenda. Accordingly, it advocated as a first priority reducing the salience of nuclear weapons and the continuing reduction of U.S. nuclear forces, while also attempting to maintain the credibility of the United States as a deterrence provider. The result was an uneasy, and sometimes visibly strained, co-existence of different strands of thinking that sent mixed messages and thus left even many supporters dissatisfied. However, it seemed at least to mark a departure from what



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critics of US nuclear policy had long regarded as an over-emphasis on the nuclear dimension of security.

By contrast, the new NPR assigns the lead role to deterrence, while making non-proliferation and arms control supporting actors. This new hierarchy of priorities was bound to invite charges that the new NPR was reversing previous US' policy, thereby triggering a needless nuclear build-up and provoking a dangerous arms race.<sup>2</sup> Five areas in particular have attracted the scorn of the critics:

First, the NPR implies that the United States could envisage a nuclear response in case of a "strategic" attack with non-nuclear means, for example on key components of US nuclear infrastructure. This is not inconsistent with past declaratory policy, but is a real clarification of what non-nuclear attacks might elicit a US nuclear response. It has invited sharp criticism of extending the role of nuclear weapons to new, non-nuclear scenarios rather than reducing their importance, as demanded by the logic of non-proliferation. Instead, critics argue, this nuclear emphasis will only increase the appetite of other states for acquiring nuclear weapons of their own.<sup>3</sup> Whether a determined opponent would find a nuclear threat credible enough to refrain from, say, a massive cyberattack against the United States, is impossible to know. A look at other states' nuclear declarations, however, makes the NPR look much more mainstream than some critics would have it. For example, French declaratory nuclear policy includes the possibility of using nuclear weapons against states sponsoring terrorism.<sup>4</sup> Russia's doctrine is somewhat ambiguous.<sup>5</sup> Moreover, one should recall that even the 2010 NPR rejected a "sole-purpose declaration," according to which the only purpose of nuclear weapons is to deter the use of other nuclear weapons. At the time, the Obama Administration referred to the further role of nuclear weapons as deterring the threat of chemical and in particular biological weapons. With cyberattacks growing in terms of both frequency and destructiveness, the new NPR simply carries this logic further. Since the document also notes that nuclear weapons will be used only in existential circumstances, the notion of a trigger-happy United States that threatens nuclear retaliation for any unwelcome behaviour remains a caricature. Finally, as the NPR notes, the idea that US nuclear restraint could induce other countries to exert restraint as well has proven to be an illusion.

Second, the NPR strongly rejects the adoption of a "no-first-use" policy. Arguing in favour of such a policy has been a persistent feature of the nuclear debate for several decades, and the NPR will no doubt be attacked for clinging to what some may consider outdated nuclear orthodoxy. However, all US Administrations have consistently refused a "no-first-use" pledge – and for the right reasons. In the Cold War, it was primarily the fear of having to wage a conventional war on Moscow's terms, which would have made the adoption of a no-first-use policy by the US and its NATO allies appear outright foolish. After all, a "no-first-use" pledge would have signalled to the Soviet Union that NATO would rather accept conventional defeat than to escalate to the nuclear level. While Russia today is not posing the same kind of threat as the Soviet Union, it still appears advisable to keep Moscow guessing as to NATO's response



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in case of a conventional attack. Similarly, since nuclear weapons may also be required to deter the use of biological and chemical weapons, retaining the option of using nuclear weapons first makes eminent deterrence sense—as the NPR emphasizes. That some critics, either intentionally or unintentionally, confuse “first use” (a nuclear response) with “first strike” (a nuclear attack) makes arguing the issue in public rather difficult. Still, the “no first use pledge” remains a red herring – and the NPR thankfully treats it as such.

Third, the NPR makes a strong case for maintaining nuclear flexibility. This is nothing new. Even though the political rhetoric of many US Administrations focused on “minimal deterrence,” real US nuclear planning for decades has been based on flexible response options. A nuclear posture that was geared to minimum deterrence would not offer the political and military leadership any graduated options and thus could lead to self-deterrence. This would be detrimental to US security, and even more so to the security of allies. As British Defence Secretary Denis Healy used to quip during the Cold War, it may only take five percent credibility to deter Moscow, but 95 percent to assure the allies.<sup>6</sup> A superpower that is in the extended deterrence business must not be caught in a choice between suicide and surrender. Moreover, given that the United States will have to deter very different actors, the authors of the NPR correctly do not believe in a “one-size-fits-all” deterrent. Unlike “minimal deterrence” schemes, however, which may not require large numbers, the quest for flexibility leads to a larger force posture, inviting charges that the Trump Administration was adhering to a strategy of “flawed overkill”<sup>7</sup>. The list of hardware in the NPR is indeed long and expensive, yet nuclear weaponry only eats up a small fraction of the US defense budget. Moreover, some of these expenses are the result of previously delayed nuclear modernization efforts. Finally, as the NPR puts it cogently, deterrence is not as expensive as the conflicts we could not deter.

Fourth, the NPR makes the case for nuclear weapons with variable yield. For much of the European media, this element of the NPR has been the only one worth reporting. After all, a lower yield, so the argument goes, makes nuclear weapons more “useable” and thus lowers the nuclear threshold. This argument has been around for ages, yet it remains the classic “straw man” argument. Nuclear weapons with low yields have existed for decades, yet this fact has not changed the view of nuclear weapons as a unique category of weapons that change the nature of war. Trivialized as “mini nukes,” some critics have taken aim notably at the B-61, a gravity bomb deployed, inter alia, in Europe as part of NATO’s nuclear sharing arrangements. Why a modernised B-61 should make nuclear war more likely, as some critics assert, remains a mystery, given that these aircraft-delivered weapons have no characteristics that would make them suitable for an offensive nuclear strike. They simply remind any potential adversary that the US and its allies do not only have conventional response options, but also nuclear ones. This will make it harder for an adversary to escalate its way out of a failed conventional campaign. For nuclear weapons as for any other weapons, credibility dictates that there must be at least a somewhat plausible chance that they might be used in order to ensure that they deter, e.g. that they will not be used. This is a fundamental paradox of deterrence, to be sure,



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yet it is not too intellectually demanding. That some critics nevertheless fail to comprehend it, is not the fault of the NPR.

Fifth: arms control and non-proliferation. The NPR retains the US commitment to the objectives of the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty, to a world free of weapons of mass destruction, and to further arms control negotiations. However, these commitments are strongly caveated: the United States will only engage in such endeavours if there is a realistic prospect of success. In this context, the document refers to Russia's violation of the INF (Intermediate Range Nuclear Forces) Treaty and North Korea's nuclear ambitions. Unsurprisingly, the conditions under which arms control and non-proliferation can yield successful outcomes are viewed with considerable pessimism. This is a truthful reflection of a political reality that is shaped by renewed great power competition. For the critics, this commitment must appear as much too half-hearted. However, the authors of the NPR can argue that they have learned from experience. After all, the Obama Administration's 2010 NPR was quite elaborate on questions of a new global drive to eliminate nuclear weapons, yet ultimately failed to reach its objectives. Hence, the new NPR does not see itself as a means to transform the global nuclear landscape by enticing a worldwide audience. Rather, it sets out some ground rules for the United States and its allies to safeguard their security in a nuclear world.



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1. U.S. Department of Defense: 2018 *Nuclear Posture Review*, February 2018, available at <https://media.defense.gov/2018/Feb/02/2001872886/-1/-1/1/2018-NUCLEAR-POSTURE-REVIEW-FINAL-REPORT.PDF>.
2. According to German Foreign Minister Sigmar Gabriel, the decision by the US Administration “in favor of new tactical nuclear weapons shows that the spiral of a new nuclear arms race has already been set in motion.” Tweet, 4 February 2018, available at <https://twitter.com/AuswaertigesAmt/status/960147043678412801>.
3. See, for example, Bruce D. Blair, “A new Trump administration plan makes nuclear war likelier,” *The Washington Post*, 13 January 2018, available at [https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/posteverything/wp/2018/01/13/the-trump-administrations-new-nuclear-plan-makes-nuclear-war-likelier/?utm\\_term=.d54d9618f6f2](https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/posteverything/wp/2018/01/13/the-trump-administrations-new-nuclear-plan-makes-nuclear-war-likelier/?utm_term=.d54d9618f6f2), Adam Mount, “Trump’s Troubling Nuclear Plan,” *Foreign Affairs* (online) 2 February 2018, available at <https://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/2018-02-02/trumps-troubling-nuclear-plan>.
4. See France ‘would use nuclear arms’, BBC News, 19 January 2006, available at <http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/europe/4627862.stm>.
5. Russia’s military doctrine retains the possibility of a nuclear response to a conventional attack that threatens the existence of the state, yet the list of non-nuclear threats to the Russian Federation is so long that one wonders what “conventional attack” might entail; see “The Military Doctrine of the Russian Federation”, Press Release, 29 May 2015, available at <https://rusemb.org.uk/press/2029>.
6. Denis Healey, *The Time of My Life* (London: Michael Joseph, 1989), p. 243.
7. Trump’s request for even more nuclear weapons is flawed overkill, *The Washington Post* (Opinion), 3 February 2018, available at [https://www.washingtonpost.com/opinions/trumps-request-for-even-more-nuclear-weapons-is-flawed-overkill/2018/02/03/f962b0b4-083d-11e8-8777-2a059f168dd2\\_story.html?utm\\_term=.1a3e6eec8074](https://www.washingtonpost.com/opinions/trumps-request-for-even-more-nuclear-weapons-is-flawed-overkill/2018/02/03/f962b0b4-083d-11e8-8777-2a059f168dd2_story.html?utm_term=.1a3e6eec8074).

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