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Deterrence: The 2018 NPR, Deterrence Theory and Policy

Dr. Keith B. Payne

Dr. Keith B. Payne is a co-founder of the National Institute for Public Policy, the director of the Graduate School of Defense and Strategic Studies at Missouri State University, and a former deputy assistant secretary of defense.

Introduction: The NPR and U.S. Political Consensus

The 2018 Nuclear Posture Review (NPR) was rolled out on 2 February. There was, of course, some criticism from various commentators. This was to be expected.

But, I am very pleased that the NPR has received considerable bipartisan support, particularly from those senior civilians and military officers who have had real responsibility in this arena. For example, along with former Commanders of SAC and STRATCOM, the 2018 NPR has been praised by [former senior officials](#) from both [past Democratic](#) and [Republican](#) administrations. It also has been praised by [diverse](#), knowledgeable senior [academics](#).

This favorable bipartisan response to the 2018 NPR also is fully evident in the recently-released Conference Report for the FY 2019 National Defense Authorization Act (NDAA), which the House of Representatives passed by a vote of 359 to 54 and the Senate passed by a vote of 87 to 10. These are *overwhelming, bipartisan* numbers, and are particularly striking because the legislation endorses the comprehensive modernization of U.S. nuclear capabilities, and includes authorization and full funding for the low-yield SLBM warhead program introduced by the 2018 NPR.

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Key allies too have expressed their approval of the 2018 NPR. For example, immediately after its public release, Japanese Foreign Minister Taro Kono [said](#) that, “Japan highly appreciates the latest [NPR] which clearly articulates the U.S. resolve to ensure the effectiveness of its deterrence and its commitment to providing extended deterrence to [Japan].”

Of course, there have been some expressions of concern or opposition; there always will be. Since January 2018, there have been several letters from members of the Senate expressing opposition to the content or expected content of the 2018 NPR. But even these Senate letters serve primarily to demonstrate bipartisan support for the NPR because, while they receive great media attention, they get relatively few signatures. Some folks are impressed by these letters of opposition; I’m more impressed by how few Senators actually sign them.

This all reflects the enduring and resilient bipartisan, political consensus on nuclear policy that, with few exceptions, has existed for decades. It is fully apparent on Capitol Hill, in the FY2019 NDAA, and among those who actually have or have had responsibility for U.S. nuclear policy and programs. It has been resilient for decades on both sides of the aisle.

This bipartisan political consensus does not need to be established; but it does need to be sustained.

There are many points to this bipartisan consensus, which my colleague Kurt Guthe ([Guthe, 2014](#)) has carefully analyzed. It promotes some goals and policy positions, and rejects others. It includes, for example:

- Placing priority on nuclear deterrence and extended nuclear deterrence;
- Tailoring deterrence to different adversaries and contexts;
- Sustaining a modern nuclear triad;
- Sustaining the deployment of U.S. nuclear forces in Europe;
- Having flexible and diverse U.S. nuclear options; and,
- Applying nuclear deterrence to nuclear and some non-nuclear threats.

At the same time, this national political consensus rejects:

- A no-first-use policy;
- A sole purpose policy;
- Unilateral U.S. nuclear reductions; and,
- A Minimum Deterrence approach to defining nuclear adequacy.

This consensus asserted itself during the latter years of the Obama Administration. It was evident in the Administration’s nuclear modernization program, its unclassified 2013 employment strategy that explicitly disavowed Minimum Deterrence, and its decisions to skip a no-first-use or sole purpose declaratory policy.



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Earlier during the Obama Administration, when Washington was awash with publications advocating “nuclear zero,” pushback on the basis of theory and from the national political consensus was quietly evident. Thomas Schelling [expressed](#) fear that a condition of nuclear zero would not reduce the prospects for war, and would endanger deterrence by creating a rush to nuclear rearmament in crises. Pushback from the political consensus was apparent in the pointed warning from the bipartisan Congressional Strategic Posture Commission – the Perry-Schlesinger Commission:

“The conditions that might make possible the global elimination of nuclear weapons are not present today and their creation would require a fundamental transformation of the world political order.” ([USIP, p. xvi](#))

It is not surprising to me when the bipartisan consensus on nuclear policy asserts itself. Past administrations, including the Reagan and Carter Administrations, began with or initiated policy directions well outside the national consensus, but quietly moved back to accept it.

In short, a bipartisan, political consensus on U.S. nuclear policy was not created by the 2018 NPR; but the 2018 NPR reflects that enduring consensus, as has been evident in the reception it received.

It may be difficult to see this consensus because most of the opinion pieces and editorial articles regarding nuclear weapons are by unofficial pundits and oppose many of its points, including as presented in the NPR. Correspondingly, they advocate against much of the content of the 2019 NDAA that the Senate and House passed by such overwhelming majorities.

That published anti-nuclear punditry typically focuses variously on advocacy against the nuclear triad, against retaining U.S. nuclear forces in Europe, against a low yield SLBM or sea-launched cruise missile, against diverse U.S. nuclear options, or any new U.S. nuclear capabilities, and in favor of a no-first-use policy, a sole purpose policy, unilateral reductions, and, in general, a Minimum Deterrence approach to force sizing.

In short, this advocacy is in opposition to much of the content of the political consensus on nuclear policy and so, unsurprisingly, it also finds fault with the 2018 NPR. The prevalence of this type of published commentary obscures the existence of the national consensus that it opposes. Indeed, the existence of a bipartisan consensus does *not suit its narrative that the U.S. nuclear policy is somehow extreme, off-track, overly aggressive and should be opposed.*

Rather than acknowledge the national political consensus it opposes, this well-publicized anti-nuclear advocacy often labels alternative views as tools of defense industry, driven by ignorance, cavalier views about nuclear war, or psychological problems such as anxiety, or “missile envy” – to put it in Freudian terms. ([Missile Envy](#) is the actual title of a book that purports to explain the nuclear debate).



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With all this smoke and nonsense, it may seem that there is no nuclear policy consensus, or even that there is a domestic consensus against U.S. nuclear programs. But, in truth it is such opinions and commentaries that are in opposition to the enduring bipartisan policy consensus, not U.S. nuclear policy as reflected in the 2018 NPR. Folks who are labeled “[nuclear Neanderthals](#)” by an anti-nuclear pundit because they support U.S. nuclear modernization programs should take comfort knowing that it is the name-callers who are out-of-step with the overwhelming, bipartisan, U.S. political consensus on nuclear policy.

Theory and Policy

I will move on to a brief discussion of deterrence theory and policy. It may seem that policy reflects ad hoc thinking grounded only in fashion and politics – that there is no connection between theory and policy. So why bother with theory?

But there truly has been a strong, direct connection linking deterrence theory and policy for over five decades, and that connection continues. Deterrence theory has been the fundamental basis for actual policy – which is why it is essential to understand theory in order to understand policy. In fact, among the most prominent scholars in the field, their theoretical starting points led directly and logically to their various policy recommendations. It is impossible to understand the reasons for the latter without the former.

For example, Herman Kahn and Thomas Schelling held different views about U.S. nuclear deterrence requirements. Some of Schelling’s policy positions put him more in line with what now is called Minimum Deterrence; Kahn generally was in opposition to those positions. But their differences were logical extensions of their different theoretical starting points – not the consequence of limited intellect, shilling for defense industry, a cavalier view of nuclear war, or any apparent psychological issues.

So, it is useful to briefly review several of the basic theoretical principles of deterrence that are reflected in the 2018 NPR. They help explain its orientation. This theory-policy connection is not obscure, but may be missed if you are unfamiliar with seeing deterrence theory as the key to understanding policy.

Priority of Deterrence In U.S. Policy

The initial point to make here is that the 2018 NPR places highest priority on deterrence. It says: “The highest U.S. nuclear policy and strategy priority is to deter potential adversaries from nuclear attack of any scale.” (p. vii).

This same prioritization is reflected in numerous policy statements made over many decades, including by senior DoD officials in the latter years of the Obama Administration. It also was the starting point for Kahn, Schelling, and other late, great scholars in the field such as Bernard



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Brodie, and Albert Wohlstetter. Schelling went so far as to ask rhetorically in a *Foreign Affairs* [article](#), “Who needs arms control” if you easily have the tools for stable deterrence? (FA, Winter 85, p. 229)

However, the 2018 NPR’s priority on deterrence is different from the prioritization of the previous 2010 NPR. The 2010 NPR states that given the end of Cold War nuclear threats, “This NPR places the prevention of nuclear terrorism and proliferation at the top of the U.S. policy agenda,” (p. v) and “for the first time the 2010 NPR” places “efforts to rebuild and strengthen the global nuclear non-proliferation regime...*atop the U.S. nuclear agenda.*” (p. vi, emphasis added)

The 2010 NPR goes on to say that its prioritization of non-proliferation, “does not mean that our nuclear deterrent has become irrelevant,” but that, “we must give top priority to discouraging additional countries from acquiring nuclear weapons capabilities and stopping terrorists.” (p. v) For those who find most policy language mundane and unimportant, please understand that subordinating deterrence to the goal of non-proliferation as the highest U.S. nuclear policy priority had significant implications.

Why? Because the 2010 NPR also said that “reducing the role and numbers of U.S. nuclear weapons” was instrumental to pursuing the top goal of non-proliferation. (pp. v-vi). The 2015 *National Security Strategy* repeated this same need for continuing U.S. nuclear reductions to advance non-proliferation. (p. 11) In short, the 2010 NPR’s prioritization of non-proliferation and its chosen route to non-proliferation mandated continuing progress “toward a world free of nuclear weapons.” (p. v, vi)

The 2010 NPR and 2018 NPR are very much alike in that both point to changes in the security environment as driving their formulation of nuclear policy. But, unlike the 2010 NPR, the 2018 NPR states that the change that must be recognized in U.S. nuclear policy now is not the ending of great power nuclear threats and the dawning of a more benign new world order. No, the change pointed to in the 2018 NPR is the “dramatic deterioration of the strategic environment” over the past decade. (p. 52)

While the 2010 NPR identified proliferation as the primary threat to U.S. security, the 2018 NPR points to the rising hostility in Great Power competition, Chinese and Russian drives to overturn the existing orders in Asia and Europe, respectively, including via new nuclear threats from Russia, and the potential nuclear threats posed by rogue states. These are contemporary realities and U.S. security concerns underlying the 2018 NPR.

Based on its careful characterization of the threat environment, the 2018 NPR logically places deterrence and restoring aging U.S. nuclear deterrent capabilities as the highest priorities. This important conclusion reflects the premise that effective deterrence again is critical to prevent war, and nuclear capabilities are essential for effective deterrence. These also are central points



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of the bipartisan political consensus, and also in the thinking of past great deterrence scholars. Indeed, available historical evidence indicates that nuclear deterrence has made an essential contribution to the deterrence of war and its escalation. The NPR points to some of this evidence. This is not speculation; it is the evidence of history.

That said, everyone should recognize that demonstrating the successful functioning of deterrence is a challenge because it involves identifying the specific reason why an event did not happen—in this case war and escalation. Nevertheless, there is ample evidence to conclude beyond a reasonable doubt that nuclear deterrence has made an essential contribution to the prevention of war and escalation at times over the past seven decades.

In short, the 2018 NPR stresses that sustaining effective deterrence, and thus U.S. nuclear capabilities for deterrence, is the foremost need. This prioritization of policy goals *does not preclude non-proliferation or arms control initiatives, or future possible nuclear reductions. But neither does it demand immediate continuing U.S. nuclear reductions toward nuclear zero* as necessary to support the priority goal.

This prioritization is neither simplistic nor extreme—in fact, it is well-grounded in both the enduring national consensus and available evidence. I believe this is the single most important theme in the 2018 NPR.

But, the public debate has focused instead narrowly on the NPR's force posture content, particularly the two initiatives introduced by the 2018 NPR, the development of a low-yield SLBM warhead, and the pursuit of a sea-launched cruise missile. Focusing on these in isolation of the underlying threat environment is a mistake because the force posture content of the NPR is a logical conclusion derived from the realities of the threat environment it describes, the value of nuclear deterrence to prevent war and its escalation, and several additional basic principles of deterrence theory reflected in the NPR.

I can briefly identify a couple of these principles.

Tailoring Deterrence

First, deterrence cannot reliably prevent all forms of attack, but we should make it as effective as possible. To do so means being able to adapt our deterrence strategies so that they are credible and effective for preventing attack across the range of unique audiences and actions we want to deter, present and future. This is tailored deterrence.

The 2018 NPR emphasizes tailored deterrence because deterrence is at least a two-sided game, and opponents get the final vote. Yet, they often see the world in very different ways. The great variability in their characteristics and worldviews means that our deterrence requirements also will vary greatly. We must avoid simplistic generalizations about how all



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rational opponents supposedly will think, behave and be deterred, and instead understand how their very different worldviews and calculations must affect our strategies for credible deterrence. We must do better than “to whom it may concern” deterrence strategies. With luck, these might work; however, deterrence should be based on more than luck.

For example, credible deterrence does not only mean that we have forces that will function predictably. That is, of course, important. But, in addition, adversaries must both care greatly about the threat we pose and believe to some extent that we would execute it under the circumstances we designate. A deterrence threat that misses what an opponent uniquely cares about most, or a deterrent threat that an opponent does not believe because of its unique circumstances, will not deter much, whatever the threat or domain.

Recognition of the need, therefore, to tailor deterrence strategies to different opponents and contexts to the extent possible is *not* new. Its roots in deterrence theory go back decades, to the classic works of Brodie, Kahn, Alexander George, and Colin Gray. And, it has been a central theme in the bipartisan evolution of U.S. policy. The 1974 Schlesinger Doctrine, NSDM 242, and also Harold Brown’s 1979 Countervailing Strategy, PD-59, were conscious efforts to tailor U.S. deterrence to the Soviet regime. The emphasis on tailoring deterrence in the 2018 NPR is fully in line with this theme in deterrence theory, the evolution of U.S. policy, and the national policy consensus.

Flexibility and Diversity for Deterrence

Second, understanding the variability among opponents and the corresponding need to tailor deterrence strategies leads directly and logically to the need for considerable flexibility and diversity in our deterrence strategies and capabilities. The more dynamic and uncertain the threat environment, the more important is the flexibility of our deterrence planning and diversity of our threat options.

The 2018 NPR identifies a contemporary example of a rational opponent that appears to think very differently than do we, with significant implications for the flexibility of our deterrence strategy and diversity of our forces. Moscow appears to believe that it can engage in limited nuclear first-use, control the escalation process to Russia’s advantage, and thereby coerce us and NATO into conciliation. This Russian belief in the coercive value of limited nuclear first-use and Moscow’s ability to control escalation is a potential challenge to our extended deterrence goals.

Agreeing amongst ourselves that these ideas are foolish and mistaken because nuclear escalation cannot be controlled does nothing to address this deterrence challenge. To preserve deterrence, we must understand if and how Moscow sees this “gap” in our current approach to deterrence. That is, for deterrence, we must understand why they believe as they do, and then change their calculations.



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As the NPR emphasizes, this has nothing to do with our adopting Moscow's apparent belief that nuclear escalation can be controlled; it has everything to do with tailoring our deterrence strategy so that Russian leaders no longer believe they can control nuclear escalation to their advantage. It means that we must take into account how these opponents think and calculate – this is hard work. Much more convenient and comforting are simple assumptions that any rational opponent, including in Moscow, must actually think and behave as we do – if so, problem solved. But such mirror-imaging is enormously imprudent and often leads to surprising behavior by opponents, not because they are irrational, but because we have failed to understand them.

In particular, if Moscow sees an exploitable advantage in its extensive capabilities for limited nuclear escalation, it may be the relative lack of U.S. flexibility and limited nuclear options that contribute to Russian perceptions of a “gap” in our deterrent. If so, then advancing the flexibility and diversity of U.S. nuclear capabilities for deterrence purposes in these circumstances is a simple matter of much-needed prudence and keeping the nuclear threshold high.

This theme of flexibility of deterrence options is a central point of the enduring nuclear policy consensus, and of the 2018 NPR. It also is a need recognized in deterrence theory for decades, including by Schelling, Kahn, Brodie, Wohlstetter, and Gray. Most recently, when commenting on the 2018 NPR, the Under Secretary of Defense for Policy during the Clinton Administration, Walt Slocombe, concurred with the contemporary deterrence need for flexible, limited options. He observed that, “The only realistic strategy to deal with” limited nuclear threats is for NATO and the United States to have limited nuclear response options. ([Atlantic Council Video 2018](#)). This is not about favoring “nuclear war-fighting” over deterrence, as some pundits falsely claim; it is about having credible deterrence options to prevent war and its escalation.

The 2018 NPR's force posture initiatives can be understood as an effort to meet these linked deterrence needs for tailoring and flexibility. Their value was recognized in the recent Sense of Congress in the Conference Report for the FY 2019 NDAA. It says: “The 2018 Nuclear Posture Review rightly states that the United States requires reliable, diverse, and tailored nuclear forces capable of responding to a variety of current threats while preparing for future uncertainty.” And, “strong, credible, and flexible nuclear forces of the United States deter aggression by adversaries and assure allies of the United States.” Exactly right.

We may quibble over the details of how much and what types of nuclear flexibility and diversity are needed to tailor deterrence in the midst of a challenging nuclear threat environment and considerable uncertainty. But at that point, we are debating from within the enduring political consensus – the priority goal is to have the flexibility and diversity needed to tailor credible deterrence and prevent war as effectively as possible.



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Conclusion

In conclusion, there is a resilient and bipartisan consensus in the United States. It has created enduring parameters for U.S. nuclear policy. It is based on sound underlying principles long-familiar in deterrence theory, and strong supportive evidence where that is possible. The 2018 NPR is a reflection of this political consensus.

In particular, the NPR's emphases on tailoring deterrence to be most effective, and on the flexibility and diversity needed for deterrence credibility are long-standing themes of this national consensus—which is why the NPR has earned such easily-demonstrated, bipartisan approval. The NPR's force posture initiatives, including continuing support for the nuclear modernization programs begun under the Obama Administration and the two additions the NPR introduces, are logical outcomes of these themes, their underlying logic, the national consensus, and the realities of the threat environment.

For whatever reason, most of the published op eds and short articles devoted to this subject are outside of and critical of, this national consensus and agenda. Consequently, you might think such a consensus does not exist. But it has endured for good reasons, despite the constant published criticisms of its main points.

Why this opposition to the bipartisan consensus receives so much of the print and editorial attention is beyond the scope of discussion here. But the fact that it does is more a comment on the national press than on the national consensus. Nevertheless, correcting this ironic imbalance may well be important to sustaining a national consensus over time. That is no small thing.

To do so, the 2014 Welch-Harvey [Independent Review of the Nuclear Enterprise](#) included several pertinent recommendations. For example: "On a regular and sustained basis, make it clear to all of the DoD that nuclear forces remain an essential underpinning of U.S. national security." The 2018 NPR has contributed to this goal.

Another Welch-Harvey recommendation is to: "Establish and support programs that maintain high awareness of verbal and written public declarations that question the need for nuclear forces and respond with equally public declarations." Here, there is much more work to do.

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