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### **The 2022 NPR: Commendation and Concerns**

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#### **Introduction**

The Biden Administration's 2022 *Nuclear Posture Review* (NPR) was released publicly on October 27, 2022, seven months after the classified version was delivered to Congress in March 2022. It is the fifth in a series of such reviews that began with the Clinton Administration's 1994 NPR and was preceded most recently by the Trump Administration's 2018 NPR. These reports are intended to provide the basic parameters of an administration's nuclear policy.

This discussion of the 2022 NPR is not meant to be a comprehensive review; rather it provides some general comments and then focuses on a handful of issues that deserve attention and further scrutiny.

#### **A Welcome Relief**

First, this NPR, even with flaws, is a welcome relief. This is because, while President Biden's past positions regarding nuclear policy seemed to be a captive of minimum deterrence thinking and the nuclear disarmament community, the 2022 NPR is not. It includes multiple useful points that do not move U.S. policy in the problematic ways apparently expected by the nuclear disarmament community – to that community's obvious disappointment.



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By doing so, we see a familiar dynamic. President Jimmy Carter came into office asking why the US strategic nuclear deterrent could not reside in a single ballistic missile carrying submarine. He departed office having signed the “Countervailing Strategy,” which was the basis for the subsequent Reagan Administration’s nuclear modernization program of the 1980s.

Two decades later, President Obama came into office vocally promoting global nuclear disarmament. Indeed, he was awarded the Nobel Prize for doing so. Nevertheless, he subsequently put into motion most of the current nuclear modernization program that now so alarms the nuclear disarmament community.

The Biden Administration’s NPR carries on this tradition of a new administration that enters with an apparent nuclear disarmament agenda, but, with time, moves toward general consistency with established bipartisan policy. For example, despite apparent pressure from the disarmament community, this NPR does not:

- eliminate a leg of the Triad;
- adopt a no first use or a sole purpose declaratory policy;
- retreat from U.S. extended nuclear deterrence coverage for the assurance of allies, i.e., the “nuclear umbrella”;
- depart from most of the nuclear rebuilding program initiated by the Obama Administration and advanced by the Trump Administration; or,
- regress to the badly-aging policy agenda of minimum deterrence that continues to be pushed by some.<sup>1</sup>

In short, despite the expectations of some and the fears of others, this NPR generally is consistent with all previous NPRs and decades of established bipartisan policy. As a former Biden Administration DOD official rightly observed, “...the new Nuclear Posture Review (NPR) makes relatively few changes from the 2018 NPR, continuing decades-long policies and strategies.”<sup>2</sup> It does not adopt the policy agenda advocated by the disarmament community for decades. For not descending to those places despite the apparent pressure to do so, the 2022 NPR deserves a good measure of praise.

I would like to build on this point by emphasizing the two most important background positions this NPR advances. These are the positions that justify its rejection of minimum deterrence and all that goes along with a disarmament agenda that is so detached from the contemporary threats facing the West.

First, for the most part, this NPR acknowledges the increasing dangers of the international threat environment and the implications of those dangers for U.S. nuclear deterrence policy. There is no need to go into detail here about those dangers; they involve the question of how



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to deter in an unprecedented, uncertain threat environment.<sup>3</sup> The general principles of deterrence are timeless, but the application of deterrence must be adapted to changing circumstances and dangers. This NPR seems to recognize both the emerging dangers and the need to adapt now. That recognition is a relief.

This point is directly related to a second background NPR position that deserves praise. That is, its clear acceptance of the need to “tailor” deterrence to the unique circumstances of opponent, time and place. The need to tailor deterrence may seem like a no-brainer to those unfamiliar with much of U.S. Cold War policy – which essentially presumed that opponents shared U.S. perspectives on factors key to the functioning of deterrence, i.e., a uniformity of perceptions, values and modes of calculation. But I assure you, getting to the point where tailoring deterrence to account for the significant differences in these factors is a basic policy principle was decades in the making and is enormously consequential.

Why consequential? Because once the requirement to tailor deterrence to the unique circumstances of opponent, time and place is recognized, so too is the flexibility in deterrence capabilities, planning and strategy needed to be able to tailor deterrence. In short, a spectrum of capabilities, nuclear and conventional, may be required to deter a diversity of opponents at different times and in different contexts. There is no easy, all-purpose standard of adequacy for deterrence; believing otherwise is the basic dangerous presumption of minimum deterrence policy thinking. This NPR helps to put a nail in that coffin, at least for now. That is no trivial point.

### **Four Points of Concern**

While the 2022 NPR warrants the above commendation, there are four points of concern that must be called out. First, despite its recognition of the dangers in the emerging threat context, it seems to take an overly relaxed, business-as-usual approach those threats. Perhaps this is because, reportedly, this NPR was not updated prior to its October 2022 release to take into account both Russian and Chinese actions throughout 2022.<sup>4</sup>

For example, the timeline it adopts with regard to the threat from China seems overly optimistic. To be specific, it says that China likely intends to possess “at least” 1,000 deliverable warheads by the end of decade, and that “by the 2030s” the United States will face two major nuclear powers as strategic competitors and potential adversaries.<sup>5</sup>

Saying that China will possess “at least” 1,000 strategic warheads by the end of the decade suggests that the number given is the lowest end of a plausible range of force numbers – the lowest common denominator. Using the qualifier “at least” for prospective Chinese nuclear force numbers is artful but does not give insight as to the likely range of plausible numbers. It is akin to saying there is “at least” one person in each automobile on the road, i.e., a driver.



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That observation is true, of course, but likely misleading as to the actual number of persons on the road.

Indeed, one month after the NPR's October 2022 public release, the Pentagon issued its annual report on China and concludes that China plans to "basically complete modernization" of its armed forces by 2035, and, "If China continues the pace of its nuclear expansion, it will likely field a stockpile of about 1500 warheads by its 2035 timeline."<sup>6</sup> Here, mercifully, the NPR's artful qualifier "at least" is discarded for the more telling descriptor "about" with reference to the number of Chinese nuclear forces. Even that number, which is 50 percent higher than the figure given in the 2022 NPR, may be low. A former senior DOD official who follows the Chinese force numbers very closely observed: "The 2022 Pentagon report is clearly minimizing the numerical implications of Chinese deployment of MIRVed strategic missiles.... Today, the low estimates of Chinese nuclear weapons numbers and projected growth are so far below the delivery capability of the missiles that China is *known* to be building that they lack any credibility."<sup>7</sup>

The NPR's seemingly relaxed view of the threat to U.S. deterrence goals posed by China is out of place given Beijing's apparent intentions, military buildup, and expanding nuclear capabilities. The NPR seems to suggest that China's threat to U.S. deterrence goals is years away, while then-Commander of Strategic Command, ADM Charles Richard, recently said the U.S. deterrence ship is sinking now and "it isn't going to matter how good our [operating plan] is or how good our commanders are, or how good our forces are – we're not going to have enough of them. And that is a very near-term problem."<sup>8</sup>

As ADM Richard has rightly observed, China's threat to U.S. deterrence goals is looming now. Perhaps China's rapid expansion of nuclear forces will not *fully mature* until the 2030s. But its threat to U.S. deterrence goals is *not* dependent on the time it takes China to reach some measure of "parity" (or more) with the United States in strategic nuclear force numbers. China's threat to deterrence flows from the contemporary combination of Beijing's expansionist, revisionist goals and corresponding rapid buildup of conventional and nuclear capabilities.

The number of China's strategic nuclear forces in comparison to the number of comparable U.S. nuclear force is not irrelevant to U.S. deterrence considerations, but it is *not* the only, or the most important component of the threat China poses to U.S. deterrence goals. Believing that some ebbing U.S. numeric advantage or "parity" in strategic forces equals a safe relationship with China reflects the type of thinking that has unhelpfully skewed U.S. deterrence policy for decades, e.g., that a "parity" or balance in strategic nuclear forces (according to a chosen numeric measure) ensures that deterrence stability will endure.





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That notion essentially is an inadequate engineering approach to the understanding deterrence. If such an engineering approach to deterrence were reasonable, calculating how to deter and identifying a force adequate to the task would be much simpler. But it is not. It misses the most important political-military factors of the involved parties, i.e., their respective values, intentions, focus, political goals, determination, perceptions of strengths, weaknesses and vulnerabilities, and communications.

Accordingly, the most important ingredients in the threat to deterrence now posed by China are the apparent decade-long developments in its thinking about the role of nuclear weapons in support of its corresponding expansionist, revisionist foreign policy goals.<sup>9</sup> This includes the use of nuclear threats for the purpose of nuclear coercion to support those expansionist goals. This unprecedented political-military challenge to U.S. deterrence goals is *not* dependent on China attaining some U.S. notion of “parity” or better in strategic nuclear forces in the 2030s. This challenge is here and now, and the United States needs to recognize its immediacy and identify a path forward to sustain the deterrence of war. The 2022 NPR does not appear to do so.

Second, this NPR curiously eliminates the SLCM-N program, against the expressed advice of senior U.S. military leaders,<sup>10</sup> and contrary to the overall thrust of the report itself. SLCM-N would have unique capabilities likely valuable for tailoring and extending deterrence in the emerging threat environment. This NPR seems to recognize emerging threats to deterrence and the need to tailor deterrence, but then seeks to kill a capability uniquely suited to tailoring and preserving deterrence in the emerging threat context. It is difficult to explain this decision other than SLCM-N—having been initiated by the Trump Administration—was the chosen, low-hanging fruit to eliminate something nuclear.

Third, the 2022 NPR identifies arms control as “the most effective, durable and responsible path to reduce the role of nuclear weapons in our strategy and *prevent their use.*”<sup>11</sup> To claim that arms control rather than deterrence is the “most effective, durable and responsible path” to preventing the employment of nuclear weapons is manifestly problematic and suggests a distorted prioritization. In Europe today, did past agreements regarding the elimination of nuclear weapons on Ukrainian soil prevent Russian invasion of Ukraine or Moscow’s subsequent stream of extreme nuclear threats? These threats have created greater concern about the probability of nuclear war than at any time in decades. Do the pertinent past agreements or *any others* now provide the much-appreciated measure of confidence that Moscow will *not* actually employ nuclear weapons, or do NATO’s deterrence capabilities provide that comfort? To ask the question is to identify the proper prioritization of deterrence and arms control as paths to prevent nuclear use. Both may be helpful, but when arms control and deterrence initiatives are in competition and trade-offs must be made, the priority must be in favor of deterrence because sustaining deterrence is paramount to preventing nuclear employment in a harsh threat environment.



Finally, and potentially most importantly, this NPR eliminates “hedge against an uncertain future” as a formal role of nuclear weapons.<sup>12</sup> This position contradicts the NPR’s recognition of the need to adapt deterrence in an increasingly dangerous and uncertain threat environment. It also contradicts the decades-long bipartisan recognition of the critical need for hedging, and the increasing uncertainties and corresponding need for hedging in the emerging threat environment,<sup>13</sup> which this NPR acknowledges.

One can only wonder at the logic that says nuclear deterrence is a top priority in an increasingly uncertain threat environment, but that hedging is no longer a formal role for nuclear weapons. Some have suggested this is innocuous language to be ignored.<sup>14</sup> Perhaps, but there was ample time to clean up any unintended language, and incautious policy words can have outsized consequences, now and in the future.

Recall that over 50 years ago an NSC analyst explained to Henry Kissinger that the nuclear disarmament language in Article VI of the Non-Proliferation Treaty (NPT) “is an essentially hortatory statement and presents no problems,”<sup>15</sup> so Kissinger did not need to think twice about it. Yet, that Article has since become the focal point of claims that the NPT *requires* movement to nuclear disarmament.

Policy words can have meaning, and this NPR’s language rejecting hedging holds potentially significant consequences. Perhaps this language against hedging, rather than being an innocuous throw-away line, was included as a hook for future efforts to eliminate U.S. capabilities needed to upload nuclear weapons beyond New START limits, i.e., capabilities to hedge. If so, it is both serious and far removed from the harsh realities of the contemporary and foreseeable threat environment.

## Conclusion

In summary, the 2022 NPR deserves considerable praise for rejecting the minimum deterrence and nuclear disarmament policy agendas. Indeed, one dissatisfied commentator with a disarmament agenda concluded that the United States should just stop issuing NPRs because “the Pentagon controls the pen,” i.e., they are written by DOD professionals who, on a fully bipartisan basis, tend to be guided by an alternative national security agenda.<sup>16</sup> They may hold nuclear disarmament up as an ultimate destination, but generally recognize, as the bipartisan Strategic Posture Commission (Perry-Schlesinger Commission) observed, “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.”<sup>17</sup>

Those who now are critical of the 2022 NPR for generally rejecting their preferred nuclear disarmament policy agenda simply cannot understand the continuing reluctance of those



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responsible for U.S. nuclear policy and security to adopt their disarmament recommendations. A pertinent insight by the late and incomparable Oxford Professor, Sir Michael Howard, may be helpful in this regard: “Nobody who has been brought into contact with that inner group of civil and military specialists who are responsible for the security of this country can fail to notice the almost physical pressure exerted on them by that responsibility, affecting their processes of thought (and often their manner of speech) in much the same way as the movements of a man are affected when he tries to walk in water....they share a common skepticism as to the possibility of disarmament, or indeed of the creation of any effective international authority to whom they can turn over any portion of their responsibilities.” Sir Michael adds the critical point that, “the impatient onlookers, who have never themselves been plunged into that element, cannot understand why.”<sup>18</sup>

I am pleased to commend the 2022 NPR for its clear rejection of the disarmament community’s policy agenda and minimum deterrence, and correspondingly, for recognizing the need to rebuild U.S. deterrence capabilities to meet the deterrence needs of an increasingly dangerous threat environment. That praise comes with a caveat, however, because the 2022 NPR also contains some internally contradictory, troubling directions that are detached from, and inadequate for the rapidly advancing threats now confronting the West. Perhaps there is more to come.

<sup>1</sup> John Isaacs, “‘Old Think’ Is Driving U.S. Nuclear Weapons Policy: Cutting drastically the number of U.S. nuclear weapons should not depend on Russian or Chinese assent and could and should be considered now,” *National Interest Online*, December 17, 2022, available at <https://nationalinterest.org/feature/%E2%80%98old-think%E2%80%99-driving-us-nuclear-weapons-policy-206024>.

<sup>2</sup> Leonor Tomero, “NPR 2022 Recognizes Importance of Risk Reduction, Falls Short on Reducing Role of Nukes,” *RussiaMatters.org*, December 26, 2022, available at <https://www.russiamatters.org/analysis/npr-2022-recognizes-importance-risk-reduction-falls-short-reducing-role-nukes>.

<sup>3</sup> See Keith B. Payne and David J. Trachtenberg, *Deterrence in the Emerging Threat Environment: What is Different and Why it Matters, Occasional Paper* (Fairfax, VA: National Institute Press, August 2022).

<sup>4</sup> *The Washington Post* pointed out, “Perhaps most strikingly, the authors acknowledge that the [NPR] documents were not updated since March...despite a war in Ukraine that was in its infancy when they penned their assessments.” See, Karoun Demirjian, “6 key takeaways from the Pentagon’s new defense, nuclear policies,” *The Washington Post*, October 27, 2022, available at <https://www.washingtonpost.com/national-security/2022/10/27/6-highlights-pentagon-nuclear-china/>.

<sup>5</sup> Department of Defense, *2022 Nuclear Posture Review*, October 2022, p. 4, available at <https://media.defense.gov/2022/Oct/27/2003103845/-1/-1/1/2022-NATIONAL-DEFENSE-STRATEGY-NPR-MDR.PDF>.

<sup>6</sup> Department of Defense, *Military and Security Developments Involving the People’s Republic of China*, 2022, p. IX, available at, <https://media.defense.gov/2022/Nov/29/2003122279/-1/-1/1/2022-MILITARY-AND-SECURITY-DEVELOPMENTS-INVOLVING-THE-PEOPLES-REPUBLIC-OF-CHINA.PDF>.

<sup>7</sup> Mark B. Schneider, “Will the Pentagon Ever Get Serious About the Size of China’s Nuclear Force?,” *RealClear Defense*, December 15, 2022, available at



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[https://www.realcleardefense.com/articles/2022/12/15/will\\_the\\_pentagon\\_ever\\_get\\_serious\\_about\\_the\\_size\\_of\\_chinas\\_nuclear\\_force\\_870335.html](https://www.realcleardefense.com/articles/2022/12/15/will_the_pentagon_ever_get_serious_about_the_size_of_chinas_nuclear_force_870335.html) (emphasis in original).

<sup>8</sup> Quoted in, Caleb Larson, "'Sinking Slowly': Admiral Warns Deterrence Weakening Against China," *National Interest*, November 7, 2022, available at <https://nationalinterest.org/blog/buzz/'sinking-slowly'-admiral-warns-deterrence-weakening-against-china-205759>.

<sup>9</sup> For a lengthy analysis of China's goals and envisioned role for nuclear weapons see, Keith Payne, Matthew Costlow, Christopher Ford, David Trachtenberg, and Alexander Vaughn, *Deterring China in the Taiwan Strait, Special Issue: Journal of Policy and Strategy*, Vol. 2, No. 2, 2022, especially chapters 1 and 2, available at <https://nipp.org/wp-content/uploads/2022/05/Special-Issue-final.pdf>.

<sup>10</sup> See for example, Valerie Insinna, "Grady 'Aligned' With Milley on Embattled Low-Yield Nuke Program," *Breaking Defense*, May 5, 2022, available at <https://breakingdefense.com/2022/05/grady-aligned-with-milley-on-embattled-low-yield-nuke-program>.

<sup>11</sup> Department of Defense, *2022 Nuclear Posture Review*, op. cit., p. 16 (emphasis added).

<sup>12</sup> *Ibid*, p. 7.

<sup>13</sup> See Payne and Trachtenberg, *Deterring in the Emerging Threat Environment: What is Different and Why it Matters, Occasional Paper*, op. cit., pp. 20-49.

<sup>14</sup> See this reported comment by Hans Kristensen in, Bill Gertz, "Biden strategy shift limits role of nuclear arms as China, Russia expand arsenals," *The Washington Times*, November 2, 2022, available at <https://www.washingtontimes.com/news/2022/nov/2/biden-strategy-shift-limits-role-of-nuclear-arms-a/>.

<sup>15</sup> Spurgeon Keeny, *Memorandum For Dr. Kissinger, Provisions of the NPT and Associated Problems*, The White House, January 24, 1969, Declassified August 6, 2007, p. 5, available at <https://2001-2009.state.gov/documents/organization/90727.pdf>.

<sup>16</sup> Joe Cirincione, "A failure to review America's nuclear posture," *Bulletin of the Atomic Scientists*, October 28, 2022, available at <https://thebulletin.org/2022/10/a-failure-to-review-americas-nuclear-posture/>.

<sup>17</sup> Congressional Commission on the Strategic Posture of the United States, *America's Strategic Posture* (Washington, D.C.: U.S. Institute of Peace, 2009), p. xvi.

<sup>18</sup> Michael Howard, *Studies in War and Peace* (New York: Viking Press, 1964), pp. 215-216.

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