



## WHAT TO EXPECT IN THE 2022 NUCLEAR POSTURE REVIEW

*The remarks below were delivered at a symposium on “What to Expect in the 2022 Nuclear Posture Review” (NPR) hosted by National Institute for Public Policy on August 30, 2022. The symposium discussed the upcoming public release of the Biden Administration’s NPR and how it should address great power challenges posed in the new strategic environment.*

### **David J. Trachtenberg**

**David J. Trachtenberg is Vice President of the National Institute for Public Policy and served as Deputy Under Secretary of Defense for Policy from 2017-2019.**

The classified version of the Nuclear Posture Review (NPR) was transmitted to the Congress in March. Although an unclassified version has yet to be released, the Under Secretary of Defense for Policy has stated that it will be forthcoming “in the relatively near future,”<sup>1</sup> though that appears to be an increasingly elastic term. Rumors are that it will follow release of the National Security Strategy and National Defense Strategy late next month.

Piecing together what we expect to be in and out of the NPR, based on the brief “Fact Sheet” that was issued in March and the subsequent testimony of administration officials, there appear to be areas of consistency with previous NPRs, including the 2018 NPR.

For example, the administration will not adopt a “No First Use” or “Sole Purpose” nuclear policy because of the “unacceptable level of risk” that would entail.<sup>2</sup> Nevertheless, Under Secretary Colin Kahl stated “we retain the goal of moving towards the sole purpose declaration in the future, and the NPR makes that clear.”<sup>3</sup> It also apparently restates the “negative security assurance not to use or threaten to use nuclear weapons against non-nuclear weapon states that are party to the [Nuclear Nonproliferation Treaty (NPT)] and are in compliance with their nuclear non-proliferation obligations,” along with a declaration that the United States “would only consider the use of nuclear weapons in extreme circumstances.”<sup>4</sup>

In addition, the Assistant Secretary of Defense for Space Policy has testified that “Maintaining a safe, secure, and effective nuclear deterrent—and strong and credible extended deterrence commitments—remains the top priority” for DoD. He also declared that

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<sup>1</sup> Greg Hadley, “‘Sole Purpose’ Policy Didn’t Make It Into Nuclear Posture Review, but Biden Wants It in the Future,” *Air Force Magazine*, August 5, 2022, available at <https://www.airforcemag.com/sole-purpose-policy-nuclear-posture-review-biden-wants-it-future/>.

<sup>2</sup> “Statement of Dr. John Plumb, Assistant Secretary of Defense for Space Policy before the House Armed Services Committee Strategic Forces Subcommittee (HASC-SF) on Fiscal Year 2023 Nuclear Forces,” May 17, 2022, p. 5, available at [https://armedservices.house.gov/\\_cache/files/3/c/3c89cba1-e46b-47ac-b468-d6a82728e23a/6844A94FDC92F3C2B6AA0C57DB270EB1.20220517-str-witness-statement-plumb.pdf](https://armedservices.house.gov/_cache/files/3/c/3c89cba1-e46b-47ac-b468-d6a82728e23a/6844A94FDC92F3C2B6AA0C57DB270EB1.20220517-str-witness-statement-plumb.pdf).

<sup>3</sup> Hadley, op. cit.

<sup>4</sup> Department of Defense, “Fact Sheet: 2022 Nuclear Posture Review and Missile Defense Review,” March 29, 2022, available at <https://media.defense.gov/2022/Mar/29/2002965339/-1/-1/1/FACT-SHEET-2022-NUCLEAR-POSTURE-REVIEW-AND-MISSILE-DEFENSE-REVIEW.PDF>.



the NPR provides a “clear-eyed assessment” of contemporary security challenges and that its recommendations flow from this assessment.<sup>5</sup>

Where the NPR appears to break from its 2018 predecessor and align itself with the Obama Administration’s 2010 NPR is in its emphasis on “reducing the role of nuclear weapons” in U.S. national security strategy—including cancelling the SLCM-N program—and “reestablishing U.S. leadership in arms control.”<sup>6</sup> These goals appear wildly out of sync with the contemporary security environment, especially in the face of belligerent threats and actions by Russia and China. Indeed, the administration has acknowledged that “The security environment is characterized by an *increased* reliance on nuclear weapons in the strategies and forces of our competitors” (emphasis added).<sup>7</sup> So I’m not quite sure how to square the disconnect between our strategy and that of our adversaries.

Now, while a reversion to the principles espoused in the Obama Administration’s NPR may be considered a “win” by those who feared a more radical departure from long-established bipartisan consensus on nuclear policy, I would suggest that applauding the administration for not succumbing to the more radical demands of the disarmament community is the equivalent of damning with faint praise.

USSTRATCOM Commander Adm. Richard has spoken of the uniqueness of today’s strategic environment and the challenges of deterring two nuclear peer adversaries simultaneously. This requires answering some fundamental questions that the NPR might usefully address, such as:

- 1) Is arms control even possible or prudent given Russia’s previous treaty violations, its refusal to allow on-site inspections per New START Treaty requirements, and China’s refusal to engage in any arms control dialogue despite its massive strategic nuclear buildup?
- 2) Is the current U.S. nuclear modernization program of record sufficient to ensure credible deterrence and assure allies in two theaters against a Russia and China—working independently or in concert—that seek to overturn the established world order?
- 3) Is the nuclear posture recommended by the administration sufficient to maximize deterrence at any level of potential conflict? Or is it time to consider deploying additional non-strategic nuclear capabilities to prevent a theater conflict from escalating to nuclear use or to prevent limited theater nuclear use from escalating to the strategic level?
- 4) And finally, though this may be more relevant to the Missile Defense Review than the NPR, is it time to reconsider a homeland defense posture that increases emphasis on defending against peer adversary nuclear threats?

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<sup>5</sup> Plumb, *op. cit.*

<sup>6</sup> Department of Defense Fact Sheet, *op. cit.*

<sup>7</sup> Plumb, *op. cit.*

Now, while the devil is in the details of the hopefully soon-to-be-released NPR, the current strategic environment—which is much changed from the days of the 2010 NPR—suggests it is only prudent that any new review of U.S. nuclear posture address these fundamental questions.

In addition, the recent National Institute *Occasional Paper* co-authored by Keith Payne and me addresses the issue of “Deterrence in the Emerging Threat Environment: What is Different and Why it Matters.” It outlines various changes in the strategic environment that require a reconsideration of “how much is enough” for deterrence. As we note:

The emerging deterrence context is materially different from a bilateral context. It expands the uncertainties, imponderables and unknowns regarding the functioning of deterrence—which remains essential for U.S. and allied security, while being more uncertain. The basic principles of deterrence are enduring and unchanged, but the application of deterrence must adjust to different opponents and contexts. For U.S. deterrence planning, those differences must be taken into account in planning for deterrence at all levels, in planning for the possible failure of deterrence at all levels, and in planning for any future arms control negotiations.<sup>8</sup>

One can only hope that the considerations highlighted in this report will factor into the administration’s approach to the NPR.

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### **Keith B. Payne**

***Keith B. Payne is President of the National Institute for Public Policy, Professor Emeritus in Missouri State University’s Defense and Strategic Studies graduate program and former Deputy Assistant Secretary of Defense for Forces Policy.***

I appreciate the opportunity to discuss the forthcoming 2022 Nuclear Posture Review. My remarks reflect my own personal views.

I have not seen the 2022 NPR and have no special insight into it beyond what has appeared in the press. That said, at this point I have contributed directly or indirectly to three previous NPRs.

Based on that experience, I can make a few comments on the yet-to-be released, unclassified 2022 NPR.

My remarks today are on how we should judge the forthcoming NPR. What metric should we use?

There likely will be three different metrics used domestically to judge the 2022 NPR. These three different metrics will come from three different domestic constituencies.

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<sup>8</sup> Keith B. Payne and David J. Trachtenberg, *Deterrence in the Emerging Threat Environment: What is Different and Why it Matters*, *Occasional Paper*, Vol. 2, No. 8 (Fairfax, VA: National Institute Press, August 2022), p. xxiii, available at <https://nipp.org/wp-content/uploads/2022/08/OP-Vol.-2-No.-8.pdf>.

These constituencies will have sharply contrasting conclusions about the 2022 NPR because their judgments will be based on their very different measures of merit. Each will be correct in its conclusions given its particular measure of merit.

I will elaborate on each of these constituencies and their different measures of merit.

The first constituency will measure the 2022 NPR based on whether it advances their favored goal of nuclear reductions and disarmament.

This first constituency has had high expectations based on President Biden's past expressed positions, including support for a no-first-use declaratory policy.

This constituency appears to want:

- at least one leg of the Triad eliminated, usually the ICBM leg,
- the LRSO and SLCM-N eliminated,
- the B-83 eliminated,
- a delayed bomber program,
- fewer than the planned number of new SSBNs, and
- a U.S. "no-first-use" or "sole purpose" declaratory policy.

Based entirely on what I have seen in open print, this constituency is likely to be quite disappointed by the 2022 NPR—which apparently will continue much of the nuclear modernization program initiated by President Obama and sustained by President Trump. And it reportedly will not adopt a no-first-use or sole purpose policy.

For this constituency, the glass will be less than half full. A judgement likely warranted given this constituency's particular measure of merit.

I should add that despite this constituency's disappointment, I suspect that its criticism of the 2022 NPR will be muted given its general political affiliation with the current administration, just as the same constituency was disappointed by the Obama Administration's 2010 NPR, but mostly withheld public criticism. This contrasts sharply with its vocal condemnation of the Trump Administration's 2018 NPR despite its general continuity with the past. Go figure.

The second constituency will come from the community that has worked so hard to initiate and sustain the nuclear modernization program of record. It is an understatement to say that the existence and continuation of this modernization program reflects a decade-long, hard-won bipartisan political victory.

This second constituency's metric of goodness will be based on whether the 2022 NPR sustains all or most of the nuclear modernization program the Biden Administration inherited from the Obama and Trump Administrations.

Based on President Biden's past positions, this constituency's understandable fear is that the 2022 NPR could do real damage to its favored modernization program of record. However, given only what has been reported openly, the 2022 NPR appears to leave intact most of those programs. And development of the SLCM-N may survive its reported demise in the 2022 NPR.

For this constituency, the NPR will be deemed quite a success. The glass is more than half full. Given this metric of goodness, this conclusion will likely be warranted.

The third constituency will deem the first constituency's measure of goodness to be imprudent, and the second constituency's metric to be antiquated.

What this third constituency wants to see is whether the 2022 NPR will reflect deterrence business as usual in a shockingly new and different threat environment.

For example, will the 2022 NPR recognize the need for rethinking U.S. deterrence policy, and what does that mean for U.S. conventional and nuclear capabilities? This constituency will focus on this measure of merit that is very different from the first two constituencies.

Adm. Richard has said that USSTRATCOM is "furiously" rewriting deterrence theory given the dramatic changes of the new deterrence environment. Correspondingly, the third constituency will judge the 2022 NPR by whether it continues to express decades-old lines about reducing reliance on nuclear weapons, and advancing arms control in a threat environment that is so altered that our approach to deterrence needs to be rewritten furiously.

This third constituency's metric will include several critical questions about the 2022 NPR:

- Does its measure of "how much is enough?" for deterrence take into account the enormous and rapid expansion of Russian and Chinese nuclear capabilities and their commitments to political goals that demand crossing U.S. deterrence redlines?
- Does it take into account that both Russia and China are continuing to expand their nuclear arsenals and promote aggressive political and military roles for nuclear weapons rather than relying less on them?
- Does it take into account that Russia has violated virtually every nuclear arms control agreement it has signed, and now has reportedly decided to discontinue New START's on-site inspections after a two-year lapse?
- Similarly, does it take into account that China rejects traditional arms control in favor of secrecy and unfettered freedom to expand its forces?

In short, this third constituency wants to see if the 2022 NPR advances old measures of deterrent force adequacy and long-familiar political lines about reducing nuclear dangers that now are out-of-touch with the emerging threat environment.

My strong suspicion is that the heavy lifting in meeting this measure of merit will have to wait until the next review, and this 3<sup>rd</sup> constituency will be seriously dissatisfied by the 2022 NPR. I hope I am wrong in this regard—but will be surprised if I am.

I should note that it is possible to both appreciate the NPR's continuation of the modernization program of record and to be dissatisfied if it does not respond to the realities of the new threat environment. I am drawn to this position, and they are not necessarily mutually exclusive.

The problem is that there is a profound distinction between celebrating the continuation of existing programs, as if we know they now meet the needs of the times, and demanding a deeper dive into what is needed in the emerging threat environment.

In conclusion, based only on my past experience and not having seen the 2022 NPR, I believe these three different constituencies will render these three very different judgements. Each will apply a different measure of merit, and each judgement will be correct on its own terms.

The critical key question that follows from this discussion, however, is which measure of merit is most prudent now, and thus which judgement regarding the 2022 NPR will be most reasonable?

I have made my personal views on that pretty clearly elsewhere and am glad to stop here.