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The Congressional Strategic Posture Commission's Report: What the Biden Administration's *Nuclear Posture Review* Should Have Been

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Introduction

On October 22, 2022, eight months after the Russian invasion of Ukraine, the Defense Department released the Biden Administration's *Nuclear Posture Review* (NPR).¹ Just a few days short of one year later, the Strategic Posture Commission (SPC), with its bipartisan membership appointed by Congress, released its 2023 report, *America's Strategic Posture*.² These reports, commendably, share some important themes that advance U.S. deterrence policy—most notably including continued support for the strategic nuclear Triad of forces, extending deterrence for allied protection, and tailoring U.S. deterrence strategies to specific opponents and occasions. Indeed, many in the nuclear disarmament community expressed disappointment that the Biden Administration's NPR essentially embraced the existing U.S. nuclear modernization programs rather than significant force reductions.³

There are, however, also fundamental differences separating these two contemporaneous reports; in fact, they often seem to come from two different worlds. Correspondingly, they recommend different strategies and force postures for meeting international threats. Despite being separated by only a single year in their respective publication dates, the NPR and SPC report appear to start from vastly different understandings of the threats facing the United States and allies. Which of these competing documents more influences the direction of U.S.



nuclear policy and forces will shape the American capacity to deter war; the subject matter could hardly be more significant.

Urgency and Needed Measures

Perhaps the single most telling difference in these two documents is reflected in their respective use of the words “urgent” and “urgency.” The need for urgency, and the focus of that need as presented in in these two reports could not be more different.

The SPC report uses these striking words *40 times*, eight times in its Executive Summary alone. The SPC’s use of these terms always involves Washington’s need to move *now* to meet a dramatically increasing threat environment. It repeatedly concludes that the United States “is ill-prepared for the potentially existential challenges of 2027-2035 and beyond ... the United States must change course urgently and resolutely.”⁴ Given this starting point, the SPC report recommends numerous advances in U.S. strategy and the strengthening of U.S. forces—strategic and theater, nuclear and conventional.

In contrast, “urgent” and “urgency” appear a total of three times in the 2022 NPR, two of which refer *not* to the need to adjust U.S. strategy and increase U.S. deterrence capabilities, but to the goal of creating the conditions needed for the elimination of nuclear forces or reducing the role and “salience” of nuclear weapons.⁵ While the SPC emphasizes that adversarial nuclear threats loom large and decisions to advance U.S. strategies and forces must be made now, the NPR appears much more reserved and seems to place concerning threat developments into the next decade: “By the 2030s the United States will, for the first time in history, face two major nuclear powers as strategic competitors and potential adversaries.”⁶

In addition, the 2022 NPR appears to be grounded in the U.S. nuclear policy goals and sentiments inherited from the initial years of the Obama Administration and expressed by candidate Biden during his 2020 presidential campaign—which, in turn, reflected Washington’s optimistic expectations and nuclear policy positions during the relatively benign immediate post-Cold War era.

At that time, many Republican and Democratic leaders assumed that the great powers would enjoy peace and amity in the ensuing years. Nuclear weapons and deterrence were deemed to be of declining relevance in the emerging “new world order” in which, according to George H. W. Bush, “A new partnership of nations has begun ... An era in which the nations of the world, east and west, north and south, can prosper and live in harmony. ... A world quite different from the one we've known. A world where the rule of law supplants the rule of the jungle. A world in which nations recognize the shared responsibility for freedom and justice. A world where the strong respect the rights of the weak.”⁷

The nuclear policy legacy of this immediate post-Cold War orientation, with its now-familiar focus on reducing the role of nuclear weapons, seems to contribute heavily to the 2022 NPR’s overarching “business as usual” approach to U.S. nuclear policy. As two U.S. Senators observed recently, “The [Biden] administration remains stubbornly unwilling to prepare for a world in which we face not one but two peer nuclear adversaries.”⁸



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In contrast, as noted, the SPC report emphasizes the need to make significant force posture advances *now* to strengthen the U.S. strategic and theater positions in response to the rapidly rising dangers and risks of the contemporary international threat environment. Given Beijing's and Moscow's aggressive goal of re-ordering the international system, their emerging entente and unprecedented nuclear threats – developments that have been obvious for several years⁹ – the bipartisan SPC report is what the 2022 NPR should have been.

Differences separating the SPC report from the NPR largely correspond to these two competing understandings of the international context. For example, the SPC report emphasizes that Russia and China increasingly appear to be *working together* to replace the liberal, rules-based international order with a new order under their authoritarian rule. While it appears that this Sino-Russian engagement is not yet a formal politico-military alliance, the level of their cooperation to advance this goal appears to be a multifaceted and deepening entente.¹⁰ The degree to which these two autocratic great nuclear powers move in concert politically and militarily has enormous implications for U.S. deterrence strategies and forces.

The SPC report fully recognizes this ominous development, and many of its recommendations appear to be shaped by the need to pursue plans and capabilities that hedge against joint or coordinated Chinese and Russian actions. The SPC report repeatedly emphasizes that the United States must be capable of deterring and defeating Russia and China *simultaneously*: “The United States and its Allies and partners must be ready to deter and defeat both adversaries simultaneously.”¹¹ This requirement leads to two of the most consequential SPC recommendations – Washington's need to strengthen existing U.S. nuclear capabilities, and the re-adoption of a “two war” standard of adequacy, a standard the United States effectively abandoned more than a decade ago.¹²

In particular, the SPC report clearly identifies the type of deterrence threats the United States must be capable of wielding simultaneously given two authoritarian, hostile, great power adversaries: “As a general rule, the most effective deterrent is to hold at risk what adversaries value most...this means holding at risk key elements of their leadership, the security structure maintaining the leadership in power, their nuclear and conventional forces, and their war supporting industry.”¹³ This approach to deterrence – threatening what adversaries value most – has been central to U.S. policy for decades.¹⁴ The unavoidable reality is that the number of such adversary targets is growing rapidly; this understandably led the SPC to recommend *strengthening* U.S. nuclear capabilities to sustain the U.S. deterrence threat: “...the two-nuclear peer threat will require a U.S. nuclear force that is larger in size, different in composition, postured differently, or all three, decisions must be made now to meet deterrence requirements in the mid-2030s. ... The current multi-program, multi-decade U.S. nuclear modernizations program is necessary, but not sufficient.”¹⁵

The NPR seems to concur with the U.S. need for this type of threat for deterrence.¹⁶ Yet, despite the emergence of two, adversarial, great nuclear powers working together and expanding their nuclear capabilities, the NPR pointedly does *not* recommend adding to the existing, 14 years-old plans to modernize U.S. deterrent capabilities. It limits support to the U.S. nuclear force program set in motion in a much more benign threat context – apparently



concluding that this program will remain adequate in a much more severe threat environment than existed when it was established. Indeed, the NPR appears to largely ignore the potential threat of Beijing and Moscow colluding on goals, strategies and military actions, and the implications of that reality for U.S. deterrence requirements. It recognizes “that a near-simultaneous conflict with two nuclear-armed conflict states would constitute an extreme circumstance,”¹⁷ but provides no subsequent guidance as to what that “extreme circumstance” means for Western strategies and capabilities.

That potential “extreme circumstance” acknowledged by the NPR literally demands that Washington hedge against the looming threat. The SPC report repeatedly emphasizes the need for and importance of this hedging.¹⁸ Yet, the NPR inexplicably *eliminates* hedging as a requirement for U.S. deterrence capabilities and goals, rejects an existing nuclear program, the nuclear-sea-launched cruise missile (SLCM-N), cited as necessary by senior military leaders, and eliminates an existing unique nuclear capability, the B83-1 gravity bomb.¹⁹ Immediately following the end of the Cold War, when many in Washington naively expected a cooperative “new world order,” such a relatively relaxed view of the threat context was imprudent, but at least understandable. Today, it is not, nor is the NPR’s related rejection of the requirement to hedge against an “extreme circumstance.” Such a perspective and direction can only be described as suited for a world order that does not exist and shows no sign of emerging.

In contrast to the NPR, the SPC report repeatedly recommends immediate decisions to strengthen U.S. strategic and theater forces in ways that move beyond existing plans, including the unprecedented fielding of Integrated Air and Missile Defense (IAMD) forces capable of deterring and defeating Russian and Chinese limited, coercive nuclear threats, and the U.S. deployment of the (all-but-explicitly-named) SLCM-N.²⁰ The NPR rejects both of these initiatives, by commission or omission. These contrasting positions reflect very different understandings of U.S. deterrence requirements related to the threat.

Arms Control

Another significant distinction in these reports – again reflecting different understandings of looming international realities – involves the role of, and potential for arms control negotiations. The SPC is clear on several points in this regard. First, the role of arms control is supportive of, not superior to nor autonomous of, U.S. efforts to sustain a force posture and position sufficient to deter and defeat simultaneous Sino-Russian aggression. Consequently, as the SPC report repeatedly states, *prior to* any pursuit of arms control, Washington must *first* define its strategy and force requirements for dangerous times, and then determine if and how arms control might serve to help meet those requirements.²¹ In short, arms control is subservient to strategy and force requirements.

In addition, the SPC report appears largely skeptical of the potential role for negotiated arms control altogether given Moscow’s history, past and present, of violating virtually every nuclear arms agreement to which it has committed, and Beijing’s long-standing unwillingness to engage.²² The SPC report does not reject arms control, to be sure, but it subordinates arms



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control to the requirements of deterrence strategy, and is quite measured in expectations for negotiations.

In contrast, repeating a point of the 2010 NPR, the 2022 NPR *subordinates* deterrence preparations to arms control efforts. Policy words are nothing if they do not have meaning, and the words of the 2022 NPR in this regard are that, “Mutual, verifiable nuclear arms control offers the most effective, durable and responsible path to reduce the role of nuclear weapons in our strategy and prevent their use.”²³ If arms control is “the most effective, durable and responsible path... to prevent nuclear use,” then, logically, it *must be the priority* over deterrence strategies and forces when trade-offs have to be made, i.e., the latter must be subordinate to the former. The 2010 NPR announced the same prioritization;²⁴ it is a little-noticed but profound point repeated in the 2022 NPR and is in sharp contrast to the prioritization of strategy over arms control in the SPC report.

Consistent with this prioritization, even after acknowledging that Russia and China “have demonstrated little interest in reducing their reliance on nuclear weapons,”²⁵ the NPR continues to highlight arms control to prevent nuclear use and reducing the role of nuclear weapons in U.S. strategy. Similarly, the NPR is committed “to working to achieve [the Comprehensive Test Ban Treaty, CTBT] entry into force...CTBT would ban nuclear explosive tests of any yield,” despite the fact that Russia has been in violation of that treaty as described.²⁶ The SPC report contains no such commitments.

More fundamentally, the NPR states that a U.S. “priority” is, “...pursuing initiatives that limit destabilizing systems or postures...”²⁷ Such language may sound benign and compatible with the SPC report. However, the IAMD and counterforce offensive capabilities the SPC report recommends have long been deemed the poster children for the “destabilizing” systems vilified by the NPR. The SPC report clearly is of the opinion that counterforce capabilities and expanded IAMD to address Russian and Chinese coercive nuclear threats are critical for sustaining deterrence—*not* “destabilizing.” In the emerging threat context, denying Beijing and Moscow the coercive power of limited nuclear threats—*if a practicable defensive option*—is particularly critical for U.S. deterrence goals.²⁸

These harsh realities regarding arms control are recognized by the SPC report, but seemingly not by the NPR. Indeed, on June 2, 2023, Biden Administration National Security Advisor, Jake Sullivan, presented a sweeping arms control agenda that can only be described as heroically optimistic under prevailing circumstances;²⁹ even arms control advocates have since deemed that agenda to be “a failure.”³⁰

Conclusion

In conclusion, the 2023 SPC report and the 2022 NPR share some important points. However, there also are fundamental differences. The SPC report is what the NPR should have, and could have, been.

The 2023 SPC report looks at the mounting and unprecedented threats posed by a hostile Sino-Russian entente, with Beijing’s and Moscow’s respective expansionist goals and the



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related coercive role of their nuclear weapons. It explains that Washington is “ill-prepared” to meet these threats and elaborates in some detail how and why Washington must act *urgently* if it is to deter them, or defeat them if necessary. This involves significant adjustments to U.S. forces and policy, notably including strengthening offensive and defensive capabilities, conventional and nuclear. While acknowledging a role for arms control, in principle, the SPC report places arms control in the service of U.S. deterrence and strategy requirements and foresees little hope for negotiated agreements given Russia’s constant noncompliance and China’s blatant lack of interest. The SPC report calls on U.S. national leaders to convey to the American people the harsh realities of the looming Sino-Russian threats and the significant requirements needed to deter and defeat them.³¹

In contrast, while acknowledging that threat conditions are changing, much of the NPR appears frozen in the naively-optimistic post-Cold War years; it suggests no urgency with regard to U.S. responses to mounting threats. Instead, the NPR’s urgency references arms control themes of the post-Cold War years—nuclear disarmament and reducing the role of nuclear weapons—this at a time when, by word and actions, great power adversaries are moving in precisely the opposite directions. In this context, the NPR very much presents an inexplicable “business as usual” orientation with regard to planned U.S. forces and policy, including the rejection of the long-standing requirement for hedging, the existing SLCM-N program, and the existing, unique capabilities of the B83-1 gravity bomb. Reminiscent of the 2010 NPR, the 2022 NPR also subordinates deterrence to arms control measures for the prevention of nuclear war. This subordination demonstrates no recognition of the contemporary threat context or Russian and Chinese arms control-related behavior.

Only time will tell whether the SPC report holds up well as a commentary on and guide for U.S. and allied security. Perhaps Moscow and Beijing will retreat from their nuclear threats and buildups, and moderate their aggressive, expansionist appetites and goals. Unfortunately, there is zero indication that such a happy transformation is forthcoming—quite the opposite. What is clear now, however, is that the Biden Administration’s 2022 NPR, only 16 months since publication, holds up very poorly. Its “business as usual” orientation simply does not convey contemporary threats and needs—as is called for by the SPC.

¹ Department of Defense, *2022 Nuclear Posture Review* (Washington, D.C.: Department of Defense, 2022), p. 8, available at <https://media.defense.gov/2022/Oct/27/2003103845/-1/-1/1/2022-NATIONAL-DEFENSE-STRATEGY-NPR-MDR.PDF>.

² Madelyn Creedon and Jon Kyl, et al., *America’s Strategic Posture* (Alexandria, VA: Institute for Defense Analyses, 2023), available at <https://www.ida.org/research-and-publications/publications/all/a/am/americas-strategic-posture>.

³ See for example, 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/>.

⁴ *America’s Strategic Posture*, p. 87.



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⁵ 2022 *Nuclear Posture Review*, pp. 2, 25.

⁶ 2022 *Nuclear Posture Review*, p. 4.

⁷ George H. W. Bush, address to a joint session of Congress, reprinted in, “Bush ‘Out of These Troubled Times...A New World Order,’” *The Washington Post*, September 12, 1990, available at <https://www.washingtonpost.com/archive/politics/1990/09/12/bush-out-of-these-troubled-times-a-new-world-order/b93b5cf1-e389-4e6a-84b0-85f71bf4c946/>.

⁸ Sen. Roger Wicker and Sen. Deb Fischer, “America’s Nuclear Weapons Are Dangerously Out of Date Our safety depends on funding and timely deployment of the Sentinel ICBM,” *Wall Street Journal Online*, January 19, 2024, available at <https://www.wicker.senate.gov/2024/1/america-s-nuclear-weapons-are-dangerously-out-of-date>.

⁹ See for example, Keith B. Payne, *Redefining “Stability” for the New Post-Cold War Era*, Occasional Paper (Fairfax, VA: National Institute Press, January 2021).

¹⁰ See for example, Seong Hyeon Choi, “Military Officials Vow To Boost ‘Strategic Coordination,’” *South China Morning Post* (Hong Kong), December 22, 2023 p. A9, available at <https://www.scmp.com/news/china/military/article/3245888/chinese-and-russian-military-officials-vow-boost-strategic-coordination>.

¹¹ *America’s Strategic Posture*, p. vii.

¹² See the discussion in, Hal Brands and Evan Braden Montgomery, “One War Is Not Enough: Strategy and Force Planning for Great-Power Competition,” *Texas National Security Review*, Vol. 3, Issue 2 (Spring 2020), pp. 80-92.

¹³ *America’s Strategic Posture*, p. 30

¹⁴ See the lengthy discussion in Keith B. Payne, *The Rejection of Intentional Population Targeting for “Tripolar” Deterrence*, Occasional Paper (Fairfax, VA: National Institute Press, September 2023).

¹⁵ *America’s Strategic Posture*, pp. 29, 34.

¹⁶ 2022 *Nuclear Posture Review*, p. 11.

¹⁷ 2022 *Nuclear Posture Review*, p. 12.

¹⁸ *America’s Strategic Posture*, pp. vii, 27, 31, 60.

¹⁹ 2022 *Nuclear Posture Review*, p. 3.

²⁰ *America’s Strategic Posture*, pp. x, 31, 35, 48, 72.

²¹ *America’s Strategic Posture*, pp. xi, 81, 86.

²² *America’s Strategic Posture*, p. 81.

²³ 2022 *Nuclear Posture Review*, p. 16.

²⁴ Department of Defense, *Nuclear Posture Review Report*, April 2010, pp. iv, vi, 2, 6, available at https://dod.defense.gov/Portals/1/features/defenseReviews/NPR/2010_Nuclear_Posture_Review_Report.pdf.

²⁵ 2022 *Nuclear Posture Review*, p. 2.

²⁶ 2022 *Nuclear Posture Review*, p. 17

²⁷ 2022 *Nuclear Posture Review*, p. 16.

²⁸ See the discussion in Keith B. Payne and David Trachtenberg, *Deterrence in the Emerging Threat Environment: What is Different and Why it Matters*, Occasional Paper (Fairfax, VA: National Institute Press, August 2022). See also, Matthew R. Costlow, *Vulnerability is No Virtue and Defense is No Vice: The Strategic Benefits of Expanded U.S. Homeland Missile Defense*, Occasional Paper (Fairfax, VA: National Institute Press, September 2022).

²⁹ Jake Sullivan, *Remarks by National Security Advisor Jake Sullivan for the Arms Control Association (ACA) Annual Forum*, National Press Club, June 2, 2023, available at <https://www.whitehouse.gov/briefing-room/speeches-remarks/2023/06/02/remarks-by-national-security-advisor-jake-sullivan-for-the-arms-control-association-aca-annual-forum/>.



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³⁰ Daniel Schoolenberg, “Biden Struggling on Nuclear Arms Control,” Quincy Institute for Responsible Statecraft, January 29, 2024, available at <https://responsiblestatecraft.org/biden-arms-control-russia-china/#:~:text=The%20Biden%20administration%20has%20spent,on%20the%20National%20Security%20Council>.

³¹ *America’s Strategic Posture*, p. 6.

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