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On 2 February 2018, the Trump administration released its unclassified Nuclear Posture Review (NPR). A leaked draft had been circulating for several weeks. The release of the NPR follows that of the National Security Strategy in December 2017, which offered a broader view of the current administration's thinking on security issues. The Obama administration had published the most recent prior review in 2010. Within the Trump administration's NPR, there is considerable continuity with previous reviews. There are also important departures, in both tone and substance. In some respects, the new NPR returns to the approach of the George W. Bush administration; in others, it forges new ground. Rather than directly criticising the Obama administration's approach, the new NPR posits that conditions have changed, and therefore require more assertive policies and actions in the nuclear field. Like the National Security Strategy, it apprehends a hostile world and a bleak strategic picture, due to a 'rapid deterioration of the threat environment since the 2010 NPR', with traditional threats to US security developing and new ones emerging.

Threats

The NPR states that there now exists an unprecedented range and mixture of global threats, including the major conventional, chemical, biological, nuclear, space and cyber capabilities possessed by various states, and the terrorist threat posed by certain non-state actors. Relatively new threats in the space and cyber domains have novel characteristics. Space assets, on which the United States increasingly relies, are vulnerable to hostile action against both satellites themselves and their associated ground stations. Cyber attacks can not only cause extreme social havoc but also disrupt the command and control of nuclear-weapons systems. Cyber and space attacks might directly kill relatively few people, which would make retaliation complicated. In both cases – but especially in that of cyber – the provenance of an attack might be difficult to determine. The NPR does not prescribe a clear, convincing defence or response to such attacks. It casts nuclear terrorism as 'among the most significant threats' – not the greatest threat,

as previous administrations had described it.

The review singles out both Russia and China as trying to 'substantially revise the post-Cold War international order and norms of behavior', as well as pursuing 'asymmetric' ways and means to counter the United States' conventional capabilities. This is not a new observation. Russia is castigated for its alleged non-compliance with existing agreements, especially the Intermediate-Range Nuclear Forces (INF) Treaty. The NPR also indirectly criticises Russia for not accepting US efforts to reduce the number of nuclear weapons. This is an apparent reference to the Obama administration's proposal to reduce deployed strategic nuclear weapons by one-third of the levels in the New Strategic Arms Reduction Treaty (START), although the NPR makes no indication as to whether or not this offer remains on the table. The NPR also states that China 'continues to increase the number, capabilities, and protection of its nuclear forces', and notes China's development of its own nuclear triad. North Korea is described as posing 'the most immediate and dire proliferation threat to international security and stability'. Another passage describes the North Korean threat as 'clear and grave'. The NPR maligns Iran in less vivid language, and the document does not seem to reflect directly President Donald Trump's threats to terminate the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA). The NPR lays out a 'tailored strategy' emphasising deterrence for each of these four countries.

As in the George W. Bush administration's NPR, the Trump administration's report downplays specific threats that might be addressed through diplomatic means. The NPR's focus is on general uncertainty, and the need for US capabilities to deal with a wide range of presently unknowable problems across four categories: geopolitical, technological, operational and programmatic. The rhetorical advantage of adopting a view of such a hostile world is that it justifies a broad range of nuclear-weapons systems.

US nuclear forces

The NPR justifies the retention of the United States' nuclear triad – that is, its simultaneous possession and maintenance

of three separate components capable of delivering nuclear weapons: land-based intercontinental ballistic missiles (ICBMs), submarine-launched ballistic missiles (SLBMs) and strategic aircraft – in customary terms, emphasising the triad's flexibility. A significant instance of continuity with the Obama administration's NPR is the new review's treatment of its proposed modernisation and replacement programme for nuclear-weapons systems and facilities. The new NPR affirms virtually the entire programme, including the life-extension regimes for existing nuclear warheads. The 400 single-warhead *Minuteman* ICBMs will be replaced by 400 new ICBMs – the 'Ground-Based Strategic Deterrent' – and the 450 ICBM-launch facilities will be modernised. There is no mention of a new mobile ICBM, about which there was some earlier speculation, though the NPR does not explicitly exclude this possibility. The current force of 14 *Ohio*-class nuclear-powered missile submarines (SSBNs) will be replaced by a minimum of 12 new *Columbia*-class SSBNs. The Obama plan was for each of these to have 16 SLBM launchers. The current strategic-bomber force of 46 nuclear-capable B-52H *Stratofortress* and 20 nuclear-capable B-2A *Spirit* 'stealth' aircraft will be replaced by a new bomber, the B-21 *Raider*. Other heavy bombers – some B-52Hs and the entire B-1B *Lancer* force – are not considered 'strategic' under the New START agreement, because they have been modified to carry only conventional munitions. The review also identifies nuclear command, control and communications systems for modernisation, in part to improve the resiliency and survivability of space assets and to defend against cyber attacks.

The NPR proposes replacing the nuclear air-launched cruise missiles (ALCMs) currently carried by aging B-52H aircraft with long-range stand-off cruise missiles designed to penetrate and advanced integrated air-defence systems. The United States also has a relatively small number of non-strategic/sub-strategic/tactical nuclear weapons carried by F-15E *Strike Eagle* and allied dual-capable aircraft (DCA), based in five NATO countries. The plan is to replace these aircraft with the new F-35 *Lightning II*, that would carry the improved B61 nuclear

gravity bomb. Whether NATO countries would accept these new deployments is a matter of conjecture. Another important question is to what extent these forward-deployed nuclear systems would be on the table in any negotiation with Russia concerning its much larger stockpile of tactical nuclear weapons. The United States and NATO have long sought such a negotiation, but Russia has so far rejected it.

Two programmes are likely to stir controversy. Echoing the Obama administration, one calls for the US to develop the capability to produce 80 plutonium pits per year – presumably at Los Alamos National Laboratory. Justifying such a high number would be difficult in an unclassified document, but the initiative is likely to be questioned regardless, as these pits have lifetimes of at least 85 years. An even more controversial proposal is the expansion of nuclear options by modifying a small number of existing SLBM warheads to provide a lower-yield nuclear weapon. This is described as a near-term measure, to be followed by a new nuclear-armed submarine-launched cruise missile (SLCM), perhaps using some version of the W80-4 warhead. The US Navy had deployed such weapons during the Cold War, but the 2010 NPR called for their retirement. According to the new NPR, these weapons are needed to fill a perceived ‘gap’ in US regional military capabilities – for instance, to deter or effectively respond to a Russian small-scale nuclear attack on an Eastern European NATO member. Neither programme would require support by host NATO nations, which could facilitate the withdrawal of the DCA from Europe as part of future negotiations, or the reluctance of NATO countries to accept new tactical DCA.

The NPR describes these two programmes as raising the nuclear threshold: that is, making the use of nuclear weapons less likely. This is a strange argument, given that for years, the rationale for new, lower-yield weapons has been that they would be more usable than the current weapons. Deploying nuclear SLCMs also increases the potential for miscalculation, as an adversary would not know if an incoming missile is armed with a nuclear or conventional warhead. Implementing one or both of these programmes could also require explosive testing, which would break the worldwide moratorium brought about by the Comprehensive Nuclear Test-Ban Treaty (CTBT), although the NPR implies without elaboration that testing would not be necessary. Another issue likely to generate intense discussion concerns ‘new’ capabilities. A key feature of the Obama nuclear-modernisation programme was that it would not involve the creation of any such capabilities, although ‘new’ was never defined and many thought the improvement of the B61

bomb implied a new capability. In any case, the Trump NPR dispensed with any such pledge.

Cost is an important consideration in implementing a programme as ambitious as that envisioned in the NPR. The Congressional Budget Office’s recent estimate for Obama’s plan was US\$1.2 trillion over 30 years, in line with an earlier US\$1trn figure published by the James Martin Center for Nonproliferation Studies at the Middlebury Institute of International Studies. The NPR claims that the cost, while substantial, will be ‘moderate in historical terms’. It forecasts that the peak cost for recapitalisation will occur in 2029 and be about 3.7% of the US Department of Defense’s budget. The total cost for the nuclear triad is pegged in peak years at about 6.4% of that budget, less than 1% of today’s overall federal budget. But estimates for such technically advanced and protracted programmes tend to be low, sometimes by wide margins. In any case, difficult trade-offs will be necessary with expenditures for conventional systems, personnel and other major defence requirements.

Policy considerations

The highest priority for US nuclear policy and strategy continues to be to deter potential adversaries from nuclear attack. But there are also – as there are under existing policy – additional purposes. The NPR lists four roles for nuclear forces: to deter nuclear and non-nuclear attack; to assure allies and partners; to ensure the achievement of US objectives if deterrence fails; and to provide the capacity to hedge against an uncertain future.

Early statements by Trump had cast doubt on his willingness to defend allies and partners in the same way all previous presidents had promised. The NPR, however, reaffirms these commitments in largely traditional terms, vowing that the United States will ensure their ‘credibility and effectiveness’. By way of the nuclear umbrella, they extend to over 30 countries. Although the NPR reiterates that nuclear weapons would be used only ‘in extreme circumstances to defend the vital interests of the United States, its allies and partners’, those circumstances could include ‘significant non-nuclear strategic attacks’, a phrase which could include biological, chemical, or even cyber attacks. The NPR does not change the so-called ‘negative security assurance’ – a pledge not to use, or threaten to use, nuclear weapons against states without nuclear weapons party to the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty (NPT) and in compliance with their non-proliferation obligations – although it reserves the right to adjust this assurance if warranted.

Nowhere does the NPR anticipate that the US would win or prevail in a nuclear

war; rather, the emphasis is on deterrence and denying adversaries their goals in any conflict. Curiously, though, the NPR makes only a passing reference to the role of ballistic-missile defence, which has been central to the plans of previous administrations to defend against small or accidental nuclear attacks in previous administrations. This could indicate that this administration’s plans for missile defence are still evolving.

Nuclear-arms control

The NPR essentially confirms the conventional wisdom, buttressed by Trump’s statements, that this administration has little interest in arms control. Nevertheless, it does acknowledge the practicality of traditional arms control and non-proliferation goals, and recognises that future formal agreements and confidence-building arrangements in these areas could be beneficial. But the Trump administration apparently does not expect these to materialise, nor does it seem inclined to seek out such agreements, calling the environment for further nuclear-arms reductions in the near term ‘extremely challenging’. It notes that the NPT is the ‘cornerstone of the nuclear non-proliferation regime’, and that the US will work to consolidate this system and support multilateral-supplier arrangements such as the Zangger Committee and the Nuclear Suppliers Group. The NPR does favourably mention the International Partnership for Nuclear Disarmament Verification, initiated in 2014 by the US State Department in partnership with the Nuclear Threat Initiative, to explore and address the challenges associated with nuclear-disarmament verification. It has involved more than 25 states with and without nuclear weapons.

While abstractly reaffirming the United States’ commitment to the ultimate elimination of nuclear, chemical and biological weapons, the NPR fails to mention Article VI of the NPT, which obliges states to work toward that goal. The United Nations and many of its members will view this omission with dismay. The NPR dismisses the new Treaty on the Prohibition of Nuclear Weapons as ‘fueled by wholly unrealistic expectations’. This treaty, which was opened for signature on 20 September 2017, appears to have hit a wall. Although many countries enthusiastically greeted the treaty, there have been almost no new signatories in over four months. At the moment, about 70 countries that voted for the treaty and participated in its negotiation have not even signed it, let alone ratified it. A graph in the NPR suggests that for centuries, wartime fatalities (both civilian and military) as a percentage of the global population averaged between 1% and 3%, peaking during the Second World

War, and have since fallen to less than 0.01%. The NPR ascribes this trend to effective nuclear deterrence – it makes no reference to other factors such as dramatic increases in global population or the existence of international bodies – which it says has prevented major wars. The clear message to advocates of the Treaty on the Prohibition of Nuclear Weapons is that it would be highly dangerous to remove nuclear deterrence from the equation until the required conditions for doing so safely have been realised.

Although the NPR states that the US ‘will not seek ratification of the Comprehensive Nuclear Test Ban Treaty’, its overall treatment of the CTBT is probably the best supporters of the treaty could have hoped for. The Obama administration supported ratifying the treaty, but essentially did nothing to advance that end, realising that the necessary support in the Senate was unattainable. The NPR does say, however, that the US will continue to support the CTBT Organization Preparatory Commission in Vienna. The NPR specifically endorses the International Monitoring System and the International Data Center, both of which have received high praise for monitoring North Korean nuclear tests and increasing knowledge about earthquakes and tsunamis. The George W. Bush administration also supported these functions, but refused

to back on-site inspection as part of the CTBT; the new NPR does not single out on-site inspection for exclusion. The new document also declares that the US will not resume nuclear-explosive testing, unless it is necessary to ensure the safety and effectiveness of the US nuclear arsenal, and calls on all states to declare or uphold a moratorium on nuclear testing.

The most important bilateral nuclear-arms-control treaty in force is the New START agreement, which expires in February 2021. In spite of Trump’s reported disdain for this treaty, articulated in a February 2017 telephone conversation with Russian President Vladimir Putin, the NPR casts it in positive terms. The NPR notes the intrusive verification New START contains, indicates that the United States has met its obligations with regard to the treaty’s central limits, states that it will continue to implement the treaty and also verify Russian compliance, and notes that the treaty can be extended for five additional years. The latter could indicate an expectation that an extension will be agreed.

Outlook

The broad theme of the Trump administration’s NPR is that we live in a dangerous and highly competitive world, with a deteriorating security environment. The nuclear-weapons programmes and

policies proposed to deal with this have much in common with earlier NPRs. The previously planned broad modernisation of all US nuclear-weapons systems, along with their supporting infrastructure, will continue. There is little change in the broad outline of policies for nuclear-weapons use and US commitments to allies and partners. New arms-control agreements could still, in principle, be useful in dealing with current and emerging threats, though the NPR considers that conditions for these are not promising. Continuing recent moves away from formal, legally binding agreements, the NPR suggests that arms-control efforts emphasise ‘confidence- and security-building measures’.

The NPR emphasises compliance with existing agreements. The point of greatest concern is that the NPR expands the role of nuclear weapons and the justifications for their use. In turn, it adopts a more aggressive and threatening tone with regard to potential adversaries – in particular, Russia, China, North Korea and Iran. In this context, proposals to develop new low-yield warheads, which may lower the threshold for nuclear use, should and almost certainly will face strong domestic and international challenges. Particularly against the background of NATO–Russia relations, such challenges could lead the United States to focus more on bolstering conventional deterrence.

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