



THE POINT OF NO RETURN?  
CHINA'S CHOICE AFTER THE NUCLEAR POSTURE REVIEW

BY DAVID SANTORO

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As anticipated, the new US [Nuclear Posture Review](#) (NPR) has attracted considerable scrutiny. Analysts have highlighted what they regard as the good, the bad, or the ugly, and debated the perennial question of whether it reflects continuity or change. So far, the emphasis has been on the language describing US declaratory policy (check [this piece](#) or [that one](#)) and the plans for US capabilities, notably the two new initiatives: a low-yield option for submarine-launched ballistic missiles and the restoration of nuclear, sea-launched cruise missiles (check [this piece](#) or [that one](#)).

Too little attention has been given to the implications of the NPR's assessment that today's security environment is characterized by the "return of great-power competition," especially more combative dynamics with Russia and China. Yet these implications are far-reaching.

For China, there are two paths. It can conclude that nuclear competition with the United States is unavoidable, and respond by adapting its policy, strategy, and posture. Alternatively, China can conclude that it should engage in nuclear dialogue with the United States – a long-sought US goal – to manage that competition and build cooperation.

#### China in the new NPR

Like its 2010 predecessor, and despite stressing the need to develop "tailored strategies" for each, the 2018 NPR lumps Russia and China together in much of its approach. Unlike the 2010 NPR, however, it no longer regards relationships with them positively, so much so that it abandons the goal of "strategic stability." While never fully defined, the assumption behind this concept was that flashpoints with Moscow and Beijing were possible but that there were more opportunities for cooperation than risks of competition. Embedded in the concept was also the recognition – explicitly suggested for Russia, implicitly for China – that the United States is in a relationship of mutually vulnerability with each.

The 2018 NPR does say that the United States "does not wish to regard either Russia or China as an adversary and seeks stable relations with both." Yet strategic stability is no longer the organizing principle. The phrase appears only six times (against 29 times in the 2010 NPR) and it is *not* used to characterize relationships with Russia or China. The term that best defines the new US approach to Moscow and Beijing is deterrence; it appears 191 times, against 97 times in the 2010 NPR. Because of rising concerns about escalation, the document also includes language about how the United States can achieve its objectives if deterrence fail and how it should hedge and potentially adjust its force numbers and capabilities.

This is neither surprising nor unjustifiable. A shift to a more confrontational approach toward Russia and China occurred [after 2010](#), when Russia and China, as stressed in the just-published [National Security Strategy](#) and [National Defense Strategy](#), turned into "revisionist powers," contesting the European and Asian security orders. They have pursued asymmetric means to counter US power projection, notably in outer space and cyber space. And, as the NPR highlights, Russia and China have not followed the US lead in reducing the numbers and salience of nuclear weapons and, worse, have moved in the opposite direction.

There are vast differences between Russia and China, however. In addition to violating multiple arms-control agreements, Russia used force to alter the map of Europe by annexing Crimea in 2014, and it did so by making [nuclear threats](#). Subsequently, it has engaged in subversive actions in Eastern Ukraine and belligerent actions, rhetoric, and [nuclear signaling toward European countries](#). US-Russia relations have deteriorated so much that [some analysts](#) have opined that they may be worse than during the Cold War.

Beijing has adopted an assertive posture in Asia, but at no point has it made nuclear threats, nor has it formally taken territory of a neighbor. China also poses a different type of nuclear problem. It has a much smaller nuclear arsenal than Russia (and the United States). Despite its lack of transparency about its modernization efforts and the legitimate questions that this raises about intent, China has also [remained committed](#) to building a "lean

and effective” force for a “self-defensive nuclear strategy.” China stresses that, unlike the United States and Russia, its tradition of “minimum deterrence” is [deeply ingrained](#) and it does not want to be drawn into an arms race. China adds that the best evidence of the defensive nature of its strategy is its longstanding no-first-use policy (NFU), which it [confirmed again](#) at the Munich Security Conference last week.

## Two paths for China

How can China respond to the 2018 NPR? Because the document abandons the strategic-stability concept and doesn’t acknowledge the differences between Russia and China, Beijing could conclude that the United States is only interested in nuclear competition and domination. Beijing [suspected as much](#) before the 2018 NPR because Washington refused to formally accept mutual vulnerability as the basis of the bilateral relationship (and it refused to adopt an NFU policy). Assessing the 2018 NPR, therefore, Beijing could feel vindicated that the United States wants nuclear hegemony.

US policy toward North Korea could be seen as confirming this assessment. To Beijing, US refusal to negotiate with Pyongyang over its nuclear program and the NPR decision to “continue to field a range of conventional and nuclear capabilities able to hold [North Korean] targets at risk” and deploy “defensive and offensive capabilities to intercept and otherwise defeat North Korea’s missile capabilities” are meant to dominate China. Given Beijing’s holistic worldview, and because it has [voiced concerns](#) that the “true goal” of the US military build-up targeting North Korea is to constrain China’s deterrent, that would not be surprising.

If this is indeed Beijing’s reading of the 2018 NPR, which seems accurate since China’s Ministry of Foreign Affairs [slammed](#) it for clinging to an “outdated cold-war mentality and zero-sum game mindset” (a statement [echoed](#) by the Chinese Ministry of Defense), the consequences could be serious. China could see it as an opportunity to adapt its policy, strategy, and posture. The most radical shift would involve China dropping its NFU policy and abandoning minimum deterrence. That would considerably alter its relationship with the United States (and others) and risk fueling the arms race Beijing has always said it wanted to avoid.

There is another – a better – path for China. Beijing could reconsider its traditional resistance to nuclear dialogue with Washington. The United States has long sought to establish nuclear dialogue with China to improve mutual understanding, reduce misperceptions and miscalculations, and define the requirements for a working nuclear relationship. Beijing, however, has consistently refused, arguing that the conditions are not ripe because the US arsenal is much larger and more capable than China’s. Beijing has also stressed that it stands to lose by engaging in dialogue because it would

be required to accept a level of transparency that would compromise the survivability of its force.

Yet, because the United States is now set to compete more directly with China in the nuclear space, Beijing could – and should – conclude that it stands to lose *more* if it continues to reject dialogue. Agreeing to dialogue would give China a chance to try to influence US actions. It would also give China an opportunity to show that it *is* different from Russia and that, as Chinese participants [insisted](#) at the latest round of the track-1.5 “China-US Strategic Nuclear Dynamics,” Beijing seeks a “constructive nuclear relationship” with Washington. US-China nuclear dialogue would also help jump-start cooperation on thorny nuclear problems, notably North Korea, allowing China to demonstrate that it is a responsible nuclear stakeholder.

Dialogue would *not* end the burgeoning US-China nuclear competition. It would also not lead to perfect US-China alignment on issues such as North Korea. But it would help *manage* that competition and reduce its worst effects, while strengthening cooperation in other areas.

I [warned just over a year ago](#) that US patience is giving way to skepticism that nuclear dialogue with Beijing will ever start:

As the United States is gearing up to make important decisions about the modernization of its arsenal in the context of rising nuclear dangers, including sabre rattling by both Russia and North Korea, it may well decide to abandon hopes of engagement with China and adapt its policy and posture as it sees fit.

The 2018 NPR sets the stage for US-China nuclear competition. Washington has not (yet) given up on engagement. However: the NPR stresses that, “We continue to seek a dialogue with China to enhance our understanding of our respective nuclear policies, doctrine, and capabilities; to improve transparency; and to help manage the risks of miscalculation and misperception.” Beijing needs to decide whether it wants full-blown nuclear competition with the United States or try to regulate it through dialogue. The future of the most important bilateral relationship of the twenty-first century hangs in the balance.

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