

The 2010 Nuclear Posture Review: Moving Toward ‘No First Use’ by Ralph A. Cossa

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I have attended a number of discussions in recent years about US nuclear weapons strategy and policy. All invariably begin with a presentation by a US official or expert who proclaims that the United States, in the past decade, has significantly reduced the role and importance of nuclear weapons in its national security strategy and will continue to do so. This is then followed by a foreign (normally Chinese) expert who states with equal conviction and assurance that US national security strategy has placed increased importance on the role of nuclear weapons and that the Pentagon is determined to develop new and more lethal types of nuclear weapons. While one should never underestimate the ability of critics to see what they want to see in any US statement, one hopes that the Pentagon’s just-released Nuclear Posture Review (NPR) will help to settle this debate.

The NPR devotes an entire chapter to “Reducing the Role of US Nuclear Weapons” and highlights this effort as one of the five “key objectives” of the Obama administration’s nuclear weapons policies and posture, even while acknowledging that the role of nuclear weapons in US military strategy had already been “significantly reduced” in recent decades. It also states unequivocally that the US “will not develop new nuclear warheads” and “will not support new military missions or provide for new military capabilities.”

While the NPR contains a great deal of continuity and consistency in terms of US nuclear policy and strategy – it is far from the revolutionary document that some had hoped for (and others had feared) – it contains a number of significant departures from past policies. For one thing, it is unclassified. The Bush administration’s NPR was classified (with an unclassified executive summary). It was, of course, promptly and selectively leaked and subject to wild and varied speculation. The complete text of the 2010 NPR is already available on line, as released by Secretary of Defense Robert Gates. This won’t completely end the false accusations, often by people who will not take the time to read the entire 49-page document, but it will make them easier to refute.

This year’s document also avoids the discussion of nuclear weapons contingencies that caused so much consternation and misinterpretation in the Bush administration’s report. The Pentagon is still aware that there are scenarios in which nuclear weapons might be used against the US and thus must be guarded against and prepared for. But, this year’s drafters saw the wisdom in not spelling these out, choosing to stress instead that all-out nuclear confrontation is, indeed, the least of our nuclear concerns in

the 21st century and the least likely (although still possible) scenario.

Instead, the 2010 NPR lists “preventing nuclear proliferation and nuclear terrorism” as the first of its five key objectives, based on the understanding that “the threat of global nuclear war has become remote, but the risk of nuclear attack has increased.” Nuclear terrorism is “today’s most immediate and extreme danger” and the least susceptible to traditional deterrence. This raises the importance of countering nuclear proliferation, “reversing the nuclear ambitions of North Korea and Iran” being cited as key to this effort. The NPR calls for increased safeguards and greater consequences for noncompliance, along with greater national and multilateral efforts to impede sensitive nuclear trade. Interestingly, there was one reference to the Proliferation Security Initiative (PSI), a Bush-era effort aimed at accomplishing this goal, that President Obama had promised to turn into a “durable international institution” during his Prague speech last year.

As alluded to earlier, “reducing the role of nuclear weapons” was listed as the second key objective in the NPR. It was here that the disarmament community’s hopes were the highest (and its disappointment likely to be most loudly expressed). Many were hoping for a “no first use” declaration; a clear statement that nuclear weapons would only be used in response to a nuclear attack by others. Instead, the NPR promised to “reduce the role of nuclear weapons in deterring non-nuclear attacks, *with the objective* of making deterrence of nuclear attack on the United States or our allies and partners the sole purpose of U.S. nuclear weapons.” [Emphasis added] While the administration was not prepared to rule out first use against other nuclear weapons states, it did, however, state that the US “would only consider the use of nuclear weapons in extreme circumstances to defend the vital interests of the United States or its allies and partners,” while also promising to “work to establish conditions under which [a sole purpose] policy could be safely adapted.”

The NPR also demonstrated the administration’s willingness to strengthen its negative security assurance: “The United States will not use or threaten to use nuclear weapons against non-nuclear weapons states that are party to the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty (NPT) and in compliance with their nuclear nonproliferation obligations.” Note the important caveat here: these assurances specifically do not apply to Tehran or Pyongyang unless they come into full compliance with the NPT. While acknowledging that this was intended to apply even in the event of a chemical or biological attack – which would be met with “a devastating conventional military response” – it did “reserve the right to make any adjustments in the assurance” based on the evolution and proliferation of biological weapons.

The third objective calls for “*maintaining strategic deterrence and stability at reduced nuclear force levels.*” The NPR calls attention to the New START arms control agreement with Russia as a significant step in this direction, but one that “does not constrain U.S. missile defenses, and allows the United States to pursue conventional global strike systems.” It promises to pursue follow-on talks with Moscow that will also address non-strategic and non-deployed nuclear weapons, while also calling for high-level bilateral dialogue with Russia and China aimed at “promoting more stable and transparent strategic relationships.” While China was a “contingency” in the last NPR, here its primary role is as a partner with whom Washington wants to work to promote future stability. Beijing does not get a total free pass, however. The NPR, early on, notes that the US and China’s Asian neighbors remain concerned about Beijing’s military modernization efforts, “including its qualitative and quantitative modernization of its nuclear force,” even while acknowledging that China’s nuclear arsenal is “much smaller” than that of the US or Russia.

These concerns lead to the fourth objective: “*strengthening regional deterrence and reassurance of U.S. allies and partners.*” Again dashing some hopes, the NPR states that forward-deployed nuclear weapons will remain in Europe at present although their role “will be discussed” with Alliance members: “Any changes in NATO’s nuclear posture should only be taken after a thorough review within – and decision by – the Alliance.” Dialogues are also underway with Asian allies “to reassure them that US extended deterrence is credible and effective.” While the US will also “retain the capability to forward-deploy U.S. nuclear weapons on tactical fighter-bombers and heavy bombers,” the NPR reveals that nuclear-tipped, sea-launched TLAM-N cruise missile will be retired “as redundant in the overall mix of capabilities.”

The bottom line: “As long as regional nuclear threats to our forces, allies, and partners remain, deterrence will require a nuclear component.” This is something well understood and applauded by security specialists and alliance managers in Seoul and Tokyo. The general publics in both countries, and in the case of Japan perhaps even some of the senior political leadership, are less persuaded. In Korea, public opinion seems to run in favor of developing an indigenous nuclear capability. In Japan, there are many who seem to believe that the nuclear dimension of extended deterrence can and should be eliminated. This underscores the need for continued dialogue, not just with the powers that be, but with broader domestic audiences as well.

The final NPR objective deals with “*sustaining a safe, secure, and effective nuclear arsenal,*” not through the development of new systems but by modernizing the nuclear weapons infrastructure and sustaining the science, technology, and engineering base. This “will not only guarantee our stockpile, but facilitate further nuclear reductions, and help enhance our ability to stem nuclear proliferation and nuclear terrorism.” Most significant here is a pledge not to conduct nuclear tests and to seek ratification and entry into force of the Comprehensive Nuclear Test Ban Treaty (CTBT), although one wonders when the administration will feel prepared to take

on this task, especially when confronted first and foremost with getting the New START agreement ratified.

The NPR ends with a reaffirmation that “the long-term goal of US policy is the complete elimination of nuclear weapons.” Most disarmament advocates are likely to see the NPR as a necessary and welcomed but still too modest step in this direction. For Asia it represents a reaffirmation of US extended deterrence, including but not limited to its nuclear dimension, for as long as nuclear threats exist. While it *de facto* offers negative security assurances to Pyongyang if it chooses to come back into the NPT as a non-nuclear weapons state, it is likely to have little effect – positively or negatively – on the Korean Peninsula denuclearization effort. It remains to be seen if Beijing will step up to the plate and enter into the comprehensive nuclear dialogue being offered by the Obama administration (along with its calls for increased Chinese transparency), or if it will continue to sit on the sidelines and wait for still deeper cuts in the US and Russian inventories before joining the game.