



US NSS 2017 – THROUGH THE NUCLEAR PRISM

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When any nation puts out its national security strategy (NSS), it provides a peep in to how the current administration looks at contemporary challenges, how it plans to overcome these and where, in this context, the rest of the world fits in. The first NSS brought out under the watch of President Trump unabashedly puts America First. Discarding even routine lip service to multilateralism or the idea of collective security, the US openly admits to furthering its national interests on the basis of what it calls “principled realism”. The term is a rather interesting one. Realism accepts the centrality of power in international politics and the US is clear that it has to be the most powerful to “promote a balance of power that favors the US, our allies and our partners”. This objective, meanwhile, is stated to be anchored in the belief that “American principles are a lasting force for good in the world”. This is distinctly Donald Trump.

There is nothing wrong with this line of thinking. Most democratic nations elect leaders to further the interests of their nation. But, when it is a nation with a footprint as large as that of the US, it is hoped that its national security strategy would be mindful of the international implications of what it seeks to pursue as its national interest. This aspect is missing from the recently announced NSS. Its sole focus on only its own security could end up creating more security dilemmas for itself and others.

This might happen most in the context of nuclear weapons. As per the NSS, USA maintains that deterrence, including extended deterrence, will remain the bedrock of its security and it will do all that

is needed to ensure this. Striking a somewhat petulant note, the NSS suggests that America’s “nuclear armed adversaries” (notably “revisionist powers” China and Russia) have expanded their nuclear arsenals and delivery systems even as some parts of US nuclear triad are “over 30 years old” and some nuclear infrastructure even of World War II vintage. Therefore, it is time for USA to make “significant investment” to buttress all the three legs of delivery.

Given this tone set by the US, it is likely that the Nuclear Posture Review, expected early next year, will continue the trend towards greater spending on nuclear weapons arsenal, command and control systems and the workforce. There is little hope that the US will acquiesce to any steps that reduce the salience of nuclear weapons. This will only increase the threat perceptions of Russia and China, who have anyway been labelled as rivals in the document. This, in turn, will make them further lean on their military and nuclear capabilities. The vicious cycle of negative security perceptions thus set into motion can only further vitiate the international security environment.

In fact, this would be further exacerbated by the projected BMD capability enhancement that is particularly mentioned in the Strategy. While the document describes it as one way of dealing with the current crop of threats – with specific reference to North Korea and Iran – China and Russia have criticized this development for undermining strategic stability. Predictably, nuclear offence and defense responses will only become more complicated in the coming years due to technology advancements across the conflict spectrum. Though the NSS does flag US willingness to “consider new arms control arrangements if they contribute to strategic stability and if they are verifiable”, it is a rather weak statement buried in the section on maintaining stable deterrence whose focus is more on not letting US

adversaries get away with “threats of nuclear escalation or other irresponsible behavior.”

WMD acquisition and use by non-state actors is also prominently identified as a major threat to US interests. But apart from identifying generic counter-proliferation/terrorism measures such as “to secure, eliminate and prevent the spread of WMD and related materials, their delivery systems, technologies, and knowledge”, and cutting off financing of terrorists or discrediting “their wicked ideology”, the document shows no real vision of how to deal with the threat. The idea of Nuclear Security Summits completed its life with former President Obama. President Trump shows no new thought on how to retain global focus on security of nuclear and radiological materials and weapons. Such a threat needs collective action in order to prevent the possibility of any nation becoming a weak link. But, with such a brazen focus on America First, the US is unlikely to rally cooperation for nuclear security.

It is heartening that India finds a positive mention in the NSS and there is much to be gained by forging a cooperative relationship with the US on many fronts. It may nevertheless be recognized that the foreseeable American policies on nuclear weapons will do little to address India’s nuclear challenges. If anything, these may only worsen as China feels the need to build further nuclear capabilities with its eye on the US. Meanwhile, India’s other nuclear-armed adversary, Pakistan, will continue to make use of nuclear brinkmanship and indulge in nuclear blackmail. Dangers of nuclear terrorism cannot be written off either. India will have to find its own answers and strategy to navigate its way in a world that is likely to become more polarized and fraught with tensions.

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