



US NPR AND INDIA'S NUCLEAR DOCTRINE



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13 March 2018

It was to be expected that the release of the US Nuclear Posture Review (NPR) would lead to its close examination by nuclear analysts across the world. The moment the document was put into public domain, microscopes were out to read the fine print and cull out nuances. Since then, NPR examiners have neatly divided themselves into two groups – those that believe that the Review is a continuation of the postures of previous administrations and marks no major break with the modernization that had been put into motion by former President Obama; and, those that believe that this NPR marks a significant shift from the past in terms of reviving the requirement of low yield nuclear weapons for limited nuclear strikes. As always, a part of the truth lies with both the camps.

The NPR is premised on the contemporary characterization of America's strategic environment, which it describes as having undergone a "dramatic deterioration" making it "more complex and demanding than any since the end of the Cold War." A modernized Russian nuclear arsenal and entirely new nuclear capabilities of China prominently figure as the reasons for the US to articulate a "flexible, tailored nuclear deterrent strategy" that must rest on a "diverse set of nuclear capabilities". These include replacements for its legacy nuclear capabilities, modernization of nuclear command, control and communications, and strengthening the integration of nuclear and non-nuclear military planning.

So far, so good. But going further, the NPR also contends that the Russians have come to a 'mistaken' conclusion that "limited nuclear employment can provide a useful advantage over the US and its allies". Hence, the US needs to plug this "exploitable 'gap' in US regional deterrence capabilities" by "expanding flexible US nuclear options now, to include low-yield options". These capabilities are sought to be built, in the short term, by modifying a small number of existing submarine launched ballistic missile warheads and, in the long term, by pursuing a modern nuclear-armed sea-launched cruise missile. Both missiles are meant to provide "additional diversity in

1 | www.capsindia.org

platforms, range and survivability.” The NPR argues that such capabilities would “*raise* the nuclear threshold and help ensure that potential adversaries perceive no possible advantage in limited nuclear escalation, making nuclear employment less likely.”

In this contention lies the rub, however. NPR tends to legitimize low yield nuclear weapons (which in NPR parlance are below 10 kT yield), and accord credence to the concept of limited nuclear use. This is an idea that had been discredited in the 1980s with the recognition of the fact that given the nature of nuclear weapons it would be impossible to guarantee that a country that uses low yield options with the thought that it wants to keep a nuclear exchange limited can guarantee such an outcome. What if the other side does not play the same game? In fact, the NPR pretty much accepts this when it states that “nuclear first use, however limited, will fail to achieve its objectives, *fundamentally alter nature of conflict, and trigger incalculable and intolerable costs for Moscow*” since the US would “not respond in theatre or on battlefield, but rather strike against targets of significance.” So, deterrence is being projected by letting Russia know that there is no guarantee that the war would remain limited. In fact, the NPR categorically states “Once a nuclear weapon has been used, nothing is certain... because the aggressor government cannot have total confidence that the war could be contained and halted short of mutual annihilation.”

So, while on the one hand, the NPR is promising unacceptable destruction as a result of any first nuclear use, it is also giving the impression that possession of low yield options would deter Russia from indulging in its escalate to de-escalate strategy. There is a contradiction of thought here. But, analysts in India have been quick to pick this idea to suggest that India should also develop low yield nuclear weapons to plug the gap that the Pakistani use of TNWs can create for India since “no one believes that India would wipe out Lahore, if Pakistan used a low-yield nuclear weapon against an Indian military formation, and that, too, in Pakistan.”

Such articulations tend to miss the point that India’s deterrence *modus operandi* is premised on promising a disproportionate response with unacceptable consequences to *any* use of nuclear weapons irrespective of yield or ‘TNW’ nomenclature (which in any case is artificial since any nuclear use would have strategic consequences -- not just for the recipient country but across the world). India does not accept deterrence based on suggesting proportionate response as part of nuclear war-fighting. India deters by suggesting nuclear use as end of game rather than just another phase in war-fighting. And, if attacking Lahore looks incredulous, let us remember that there are 67 other consequential cities in Pakistan that could make for credible targets. Possession of TNWs is not essential to make India’s nuclear deterrence strategy credible.

Rather, India would do best to remember and remind others of the futility, and the dangers of safety, security and inadvertent escalation, that TNWs pose, instead of falling into the same trap. The NPR needs a more careful look to understand some contradictions that it itself suffers from before the Indian nuclear doctrine starts taking lessons from it.

(Disclaimer: The views and opinions expressed in this article are those of the author and do not necessarily reflect the position of the Centre for Air Power Studies [CAPS])

Keywords: US NPR, India's Nuclear Doctrine, Tactical Nuclear Weapons, Nuclear strategy

