



US NUCLEAR POSTURE REVIEW 2010

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What does a country do when its President publicly reiterates a personal desire for moving towards a world without nuclear weapons, but others in his administration, including his Secretary of Defence, are convinced that the nation must retain a nuclear arsenal to deter potential adversaries and reassure allies? The country comes up with a Nuclear Posture Review (NPR) of the kind that has been announced in April 2010. The document, result of inter-agency deliberations, certainly reflects the interests and concerns of the many stakeholders in the American nuclear arsenal.¹ So, while on the one hand, the NPR seeks to promote the “President’s agenda for reducing nuclear dangers and pursuing the goal of a world without nuclear weapons”, it simultaneously advances “broader US security interests” that require the retention of a “safe, secure, and effective nuclear arsenal”.

To be fair, the new NPR does go a few steps beyond the last such review produced during the Bush administration in 2002. But, at the same time, it ensures that it does not veer too far from the beaten track. What, then, is the new ground that the NPR covers? What more could have been done? Or could it have, given the circumstances in which President Obama is operating at home and abroad? Which are some of the key elements that India can support and urge more action on? These are some of the questions that this issue brief seeks to address.

Highlights of NPR 2010

The US Nuclear Posture Review is meant to provide direction to the US nuclear strategy. An examination of the current NPR helps identify the following highlights:

- Among the five key objectives enlisted for US nuclear weapons policies and posture, “preventing nuclear terrorism and nuclear

proliferation” takes precedence over maintaining strategic deterrence, including of the extended variety meant for reassuring the allies.

- The US plans to address the biggest threat of nuclear terrorism and proliferation by taking three steps – reinforcing the non-proliferation regime centered on the NPT (including strengthening the IAEA safeguards and enforcing compliance with them); accelerating efforts to secure vulnerable nuclear materials worldwide; and pursuing arms control to help mobilize international support for both the earlier objectives. The NPR also sounds a warning that the US would “hold fully accountable any state, terrorist group, or other non-state actor that supports or enables terrorist efforts” to obtain or use WMD. The definition of such efforts includes “facilitating, financing, providing expertise or safe havens”. And in case of culpability, the US response would be “effective and overwhelming”.

- The NPR candidly accepts that US nuclear force level reductions have been enabled by ‘unrivaled’ US conventional capability, improved missile defences and easing of Cold War rivalries. The international security environment allows the US to restructure its force levels “without jeopardizing our traditional deterrence and reassurance goals”. Therefore, the nuclear reductions actually amount to rationalizing the American arsenal, or in other words, making a virtue of necessity and the NPR claims no higher moral or noble intentions for doing so. Rather, it seeks to gain mileage from it by demonstrating US commitment to NPT Article VI obligations and thereby persuading others to reinvigorate the non-proliferation regime.

- As a measure towards reducing the role of US nuclear weapons, the NPR provides negative security assurances (NSA)

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to those non-nuclear member states of the NPT who are 'in compliance' with their treaty obligations. It may be recalled that NSA have been provided by the US in the past as non-binding assurances largely linked to its commitments under various nuclear weapons free zones. By making this declaration, this NPR reverses the position of the earlier one that had declared use of US nuclear weapons against chemical and biological attacks. However, that the US had to perform a delicate balancing act in making this concession is evident from the fact that the document clearly states that the use of CBW against the US or its allies would invite a "devastating conventional military response" even as the US "reserves the right to make any adjustment in the assurance" based on how such a threat evolved in the future. To that extent, the NPR does not concede that the sole purpose of nuclear weapons is nuclear deterrence, but retains the option of having to use nuclear weapons for deterring conventional or CBW attacks in a "narrow range of contingencies".

- While not abandoning the first use posture, the NPR does limit the use of nuclear weapons "in extreme circumstances to defend the vital interests of the US or its allies and partners".

- The NPR emphasizes the need for "dialogue on strategic stability" with Russia and China. While stating the many positive developments in US-Russia relationship that have reduced the prospects for military confrontation, the NPR nevertheless accepts the centrality of Russia's nuclear force in determining how much and how quickly US force reductions could take place. As a follow on to the New START, it does identify the need to address non-strategic nuclear weapons and the non-deployed arsenals on both sides.

- On China, the NPR expresses concern over "China's future strategic intentions" considering the lack of transparency on its pace and scope of nuclear programme and nuclear doctrine. The NPR, therefore, recommends dialogue to "enhance confidence, improve transparency and reduce mistrust".

- The NPR categorically renounces the development of any new nuclear weapons or further nuclear testing. It weighs instead in favour of extending the life of the existing warheads by reusing or replacing nuclear components from different warheads and by modernizing nuclear facilities, including national security labs, and investing in human capital. The NPR echoes the concern often raised in the past by US nuclear weapon labs that not enough attention had been devoted towards recruitment and retention of

weapon scientists and engineers or to providing them sufficient challenges in R and D in order to maintain technically skilled personnel to address unknown future challenges. The NPR addresses this concern by committing increased investments in the nuclear weapons complex. In fact, in his signed statement as part of the NPR, Secretary of Defence refers to the \$ 5 billion that he intends to have transferred from the Department of Defence to that of Energy in order to cater for sustenance of the nuclear infrastructure.

- The NPR admits the need for retention of a nuclear triad of delivery vectors, though at reduced levels, "to maintain strategic stability at reasonable cost, while hedging against potential technical problems and vulnerabilities." In fact, the NPR even considers the life spans of the various delivery vehicles and makes recommendations accordingly. For instance, in the case of the Ohio-class submarines, which would be due for retirement by 2027,

the NPR recommends that the Navy must begin technology development for SSBN replacement. Similarly, while no follow-on ICBM is immediately needed for the Minuteman III (whose life is well into 2030s), the NPR suggests studies on alternatives to be

conducted in fiscal years 2011-2012 for informed decisions to be made when necessary.

- It commits the US to 'deMIRV' all deployed ICBMs from the current one to three warheads to only one each as a step towards enhancing stability of the nuclear balance by reducing the incentive for either side to strike first. It also states the US decision to retire the nuclear tipped sea-launched cruise missile, TLAM-N.

- The NPR claims to have met the objectives of US nuclear strategy through a "balanced, integrated and sustained" approach based on a "strong bipartisan consensus" so that the long-term strategy can be implemented with continuity irrespective of the political nature of the future administrations.

Disappointments with NPR 2010

As is evident from the above, the NPR does tread some new ground, ever so tentatively, in reducing the role of nuclear weapons. However, it is possible to pick a few disappointments with the much-awaited document.

- It places a high emphasis on strengthening conventional capability as a counter for balancing the reduced role of nuclear weapons. In fact, the document almost flaunts US capabilities to fight all kinds of conflicts with the help of

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its assets in cyberspace and outer space, global basing and posture and BMD capabilities. This cannot be a source of reassurance for the NNWS. Those states that feel a threat of being subjected to regime change or political coercion by the US will continue to desire the nuclear weapon as a strategic equalizer against US conventional superiority. To that extent then, the US move towards reducing the role of the nuclear weapon as a measure to reduce its attractiveness for other NNWS stands defeated.

- The mere reduction of numbers in US nuclear arsenal cannot be expected to ease inter-state relations.
- The preservation of the option for use of heavy bombers and long range missiles, traditionally strategic delivery vehicles, in conventional roles adds to ambiguity and will destabilize strategic equations with existing NWS. In fact, the NPR recommends, "retaining a margin above the required nuclear force structure for the possible addition of non-nuclear prompt-global strike capabilities." Given that the document lays so much emphasis on strategic dialogue with Russia and China for establishing stability, moves such as this will complicate dialogue and compel these nations to hedge against perceived uncertainties. Meanwhile, it is also difficult to escape the conclusion that this aims to deal with NNWS and/or those with small nuclear arsenals. Such a signal then cannot be reassuring even if the US has provided NSA to the NNWS.
- The NPR retains the maintenance of high alert postures of the triad. So, while heavy bombers may be off full time alert, nearly all ICBMs remain on alert and a significant number of the SSBNs on continuous at sea deployments. However, to minimize chances of accidental launch, the NPR supports the continuance of the practice of "open-ocean targeting" of all ICBMs and SLBMs and plans to ask Russia too to reconfirm this commitment. The existential risks involved with high alert postures, nonetheless, continue.

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And yet, a realistic and objective analysis of the document shows that one should not have expected more than what has been made available. In a sense, this might be the best that

could have been managed given the political constraints under which Obama is functioning. His popularity as president (relative to the high levels that he entered White House with) is substantially low, the Republican presence is palpably stronger, his inability to make much headway in Afghanistan despite the hyped Af-Pak strategy has him boxed in, the administration has barely managed a grip on the economic downslide, the US is still unsure of Russian responses despite the tentative reset with the New START, China remains a strategic concern, and above all the ambiguous responses of the allies to US nuclear moves has been confounding, to say the least. So, while publicly Japan hails Obama's speeches of the kind in Prague, it privately expresses concern over a possible degradation of the US nuclear umbrella. Given this background, it is easier to understand the compulsions that the NPR was crafted under and hence, its tenor.

Anything for India?

While the NPR is meant to be a guiding directive for US nuclear strategy, it also provides an understanding of the thinking on nuclear issues, and to that extent has a bearing on nuclear strategies of other countries too. There are some aspects of the NPR that India must examine carefully. The first of these would be the initiative to "enhance

India must second Obama's vision to make the PSI into a "durable international institution". The PSI is already 90 countries strong. They coordinate, share intelligence and build capacity to interdict WMD related transfers. Political and legal reasons have not allowed India to be a part of the PSI. But India does share the objectives of this initiative, and in case, this can acquire a more international complexion, India should become a part of this global endeavour to check proliferation.

national and international capabilities to disrupt illicit proliferation networks and interdict smuggled nuclear materials". Considering that India faces a tangible threat of nuclear terrorism given its proximity to Pakistan, this is an effort that India must support. To that extent, India must second Obama's vision to make the PSI into a "durable international institution". The PSI is already 90 countries strong. They coordinate, share intelligence and build capacity to interdict WMD related transfers. Political and legal reasons have not

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Secondly, those provisions of the NPR that indicate some move towards nuclear elimination, even if much into the future, merit India's support. For instance, the NPR calls for initiating "a comprehensive national research and development program to support continued progress towards a world free of nuclear weapons, including expanded work on verification technologies and the development of transparency measures".

Thirdly, the concept of "cradle to grave nuclear fuel management" as part of multilateral fuel supply assurances is an idea that India can meaningfully contribute towards. Obviously, India supports the objective of "promoting the peaceful uses of nuclear energy without increasing proliferation risks". Ideas on how to realize this objective – establishment of international fuel banks or other multinational fuel facilities – have been discussed over the years. The Indian Prime Minister spelt out some contours of how India could contribute to this at the recently concluded Nuclear Security Summit and this needs to be followed up.

Conclusion

The NPR indicates the broad direction in which US nuclear strategy will move in the coming years. That there is scope for a lot more action to realize the vision of a NFWF is evident. Unfortunately, entrenched thinking on nuclear weapons will not allow progress to be made very quickly. Even so, Obama, given his personal desire for the goal and the psychological pressure of the Nobel Peace Prize that he has already received, was expected to pitch higher.

That he eventually accepted this NPR, in a sense, shows the limits of the US President, even if he is theoretically the most powerful man on earth.

Among the factors that hold back the US from moving much on changing the role of nuclear weapons is the extended deterrence that it offers to its allies. The NPR is peppered throughout with reassurance to US allies about its being "fully committed" to its security relationship with them. The US also believes that this commitment not only deters potential threats but also secures non-proliferation by "reassuring non-nuclear US allies and partners that their security interests can be protected without their own nuclear deterrent capabilities". It is because of the compulsions of maintaining a credible nuclear umbrella that the US finds itself unable to give up the need for the triad and for the deployment of non-strategic weapons in key regions. The NPR admits that the unique nuclear sharing arrangements contribute to Alliance cohesion and hence any revision in this aspect of the US nuclear strategy can only come from an alteration in NATO's Strategic Concept.

In case Obama does get a second term in office, would this NPR have loosened the soil a bit for him to uproot the hold of nuclear weapons? That remains to be seen. For the moment though, it is business, well, nearly as usual, with a few new procedures and a slightly altered dress code – the tie can be loosened a bit and Friday dressing is allowed. But no more, for now.

Notes

¹ The NPR was conducted by the Secretary of Defence in consultation with the Secretaries of State and Energy. The Military, including the US Strategic Command also contributed, besides the Departments of Homeland, Treasury and the Office of the Director of National Intelligence.



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