



### AN ASSESSMENT OF THE 2022 UNITED STATES NUCLEAR POSTURE REVIEW

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The Nuclear Posture Review (NPR) of the Biden administration was released in a classified form on March 28, 2022, in the United States (US) Congress. The unclassified version of the National Defense Strategy, comprising the NPR and the Missile Defense Review, was released for the wider audience on October 27, 2022. The NPR upheld that “the fundamental role of US nuclear weapons is to deter nuclear attack on the United States,... allies, and partners.”<sup>1</sup> Due to the Russia-Ukraine conflict that has been going on since February 24, 2022, and has now lasted close to a year, the timing of the document’s distribution is critical. Further, given the significant modernisation of its nuclear weapons, China poses a potential threat to the US and its allies in East Asia.

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The fundamental objectives of the US NPR revolve around maintaining a robust and effective nuclear deterrent and a credible extended deterrence commitment. In conjunction with the publication of the three policy documents, US President Joe Biden declared that as long as nuclear weapons exist, their main purpose is to avert a nuclear strike on the US, its allies, and partners. The NPR names Russia and China as two other nuclear-capable rivals of the US. It also highlights the US resolve to maintain its emphasis on strategic stability, refrain from costly arms race, and promote risk reduction and arms control agreements whenever practicable.

The NPR was first brought out in 1994, during Bill Clinton’s presidency, and aimed at defining the role of nuclear weapons in the post-Cold War period. During his presidential election campaign, President Joe Biden maintained his position to reduce the role of

nuclear weapons in warfighting.<sup>2</sup> Earlier, he had also stated that the sole function of nuclear weapons should be limited to deterring an adversary while upholding the ‘No First Use’ (NFU) position of the US.<sup>3</sup> The present NPR also states that the US would continue to work on reducing “costly arms races and facilitate risk reduction and arms control arrangements where possible”<sup>4</sup> through mutually verifiable arms control measures with Russia and China.<sup>5</sup>

Some of the key points which stand out in the NPR document are the following:

### *Strategic Adversaries*

The current NPR is notable since it was released against the backdrop of the ongoing war between Russia and Ukraine and the accompanying threat of a nuclear accident or conflict. Russian President Vladimir Putin had threatened to use nuclear weapons to secure the interests of his state in its immediate geopolitical neighbourhood.<sup>6</sup> As this Russian military campaign had the greatest impact on Europe since World War II, it highlighted the possibility of rising tensions between NWS. Due to the increased pace at which China is modernising its strategic arsenal, its stock as a credible strategic nuclear opponent to the US has increased manifold. In its strategic triad, China has gradually increased the pace of “modernisation of its silo-based long-range nuclear missiles” and nuclear deterrent capability. According to a United States Strategic Command (US STRATCOM) assessment that was released on November 29, 2022, China will most likely be able to stockpile roughly 1500 warheads on its intercontinental ballistic missiles (ICBMs) by the year 2035. Furthermore, the risks to the US extended nuclear deterrence umbrella have grown due to China’s hostility toward its eastern neighbours like Taiwan (due to the Taiwan Strait’s importance for the People’s Liberation Army Navy) and the rest of northeast Asia. This has pushed the US into a phase where it is now faced with two nuclear adversaries in the international sphere.

North Korea, in October 2022, had approved legislation that codified its nuclear posture, including using nuclear weapons first to defend against an attack. The NPR recognises North Korea as a “persistent threat and growing danger” to the US and the Indo-Pacific region.<sup>7</sup> The NPR also identifies North Korea “as a target for US nuclear weapons planning”<sup>8</sup> and states that any nuclear attack by the North Korean regime on the US or its allies is unacceptable and would be met with an adequate reaction against the regime.<sup>9</sup> The NPR also refers to Iran as an adversarial nuclear state while citing its intention to develop a nuclear programme. Additionally, as Iran has threatened to withdraw from the Non-Proliferation Treaty (NPT) because of the US withdrawal from

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### *Revised Deterrence Posture and Declaratory Policy*

The NPR reiterated the earlier pledge by the US to decrease the role of nuclear weapons and be an exemplar in terms of international arms control. This task intends to limit an expensive arms race and enable risk reduction mechanisms among states. The NPR has delineated the following roles: “deter strategic attacks, assure allies and partners, and achieve US objectives if deterrence fails”.<sup>11</sup> Moreover, President Biden, who was keen on the NFU position of the state during his electoral campaign days, is seen to have modified his position in the current NPR. The 2022 NPR mentions that “the United States maintains a very high bar for the employment of nuclear weapons, our nuclear posture is intended to complicate an adversary’s entire decision calculus, including whether to instigate a crisis, initiate armed conflict, conduct strategic attacks using non-nuclear capabilities, or escalate to the use of nuclear weapons on any scale.”<sup>12</sup> Even though the US continues to maintain the principle of no-use against non-nuclear weapons state (NNWS) who comply with the NPT directives, for other strategic rivals, the US retains some contingencies to deter nuclear or any conventional attacks. This has prompted the US to reject a unilateral NFU, with the sole purpose of accommodating any strategic risk.<sup>13</sup> However, it is noteworthy that the sole purpose of nuclear weapons does not lie in deterring but also rests on the likelihood of retaliating against any possible nuclear attack. Hence, the US has brought out a tailored “integrated deterrence approach” to delineate a comprehensive approach comprising nuclear and non-nuclear options to be used depending on the threats faced.<sup>14</sup>

With the call for adopting the integrated deterrence approach, the US NPR has set the course for accelerating the modernisation of its triad capacity. This has led to the retirement of specific nuclear weapon systems and components. Due to redundancy and duplication, the B83-1 gravity bomb, hard and deeply buried targets (HDBT), and the Nuclear-Armed Sea-Launched Cruise Missile (SLCM-N), a low-yield nuclear-armed sea-based cruise missile, were retired. Moreover, in keeping with the tailored strategy of the US nuclear strategy, the W76-2 warhead, an Sea-Launched Ballistic Missile (SLBM), continues to be a crucial weapon in the scheme of US deterrence. The 2022 NPR echoes the positions of the 2018 NPR in upgrading conventional weapons capability to develop a flexible strategy and reduce the reliance on nuclear weapons.

### *Extended Deterrence Commitments*

The NPR reaffirmed the commitment of the US towards its allies in maintaining a credible extended nuclear deterrent posture. The concept of extended nuclear deterrence helps the US achieve its non-proliferation objectives by instilling confidence in its allies and partners that they can fend off strategic threats and stay safe without acquiring nuclear weapons.<sup>15</sup> This assists in supporting the nuclear partnership of NATO, which

“includes modernising US nuclear weapons forward-deployed in Europe and, with participating NATO Allies, transitioning to a new generation of fighter aircraft, including the US F-35A Joint Strike Fighter”<sup>16</sup> and B-61 gravity bombs. The NPR discussed the need to strengthen the extended deterrence structure with European and East Asian allies through frequent dialogues and military exercises and to consolidate the nuclear and non-nuclear defence capabilities of NATO. Stress is also laid on “forward-deploy strategic bombers, dual-capable aircraft, and other nuclear weapons to the region”.<sup>17</sup>

### *Arms Control and Risk Reduction Initiatives*

The classified version of the 2022 NPR was released in late March, a month after the Russian ‘special operation’ in Ukraine had begun. Against this particular backdrop, it must be noted that Russia possesses around 2000 non-strategic and non-treaty bound nuclear weapons and “several novel nuclear-capable systems designed to hold the US homeland or Allies and partners at risk, some of which are also not accountable under New START (Strategic Arms Reduction Treaty).”<sup>18</sup> Arms control agreements, such as the New START, which is to expire in February 2026, have pushed the US to negotiate a new arms limitation framework with Russia. On November 29, 2022, the Bilateral Consultative Commission (BCC) for the New START Treaty was scheduled to meet in Cairo, Egypt, to discuss the New START Treaty’s implementation. However, Russia declared it would suggest alternative dates after unilaterally postponing the conference.<sup>19</sup>

The NPR called for engaging with China for a “strategic stability dialogue”<sup>20</sup> on a wide range of crucial issues such as fissile material production, “military de-confliction, crisis communications, information sharing, mutual restraint, risk reduction, emerging technologies, and approaches to nuclear arms control,”<sup>21</sup> despite there being much reciprocal enthusiasm from China.

The NPR reaffirmed the US commitment towards the NPT, the Additional Protocol to the International Atomic Energy Agency’s safeguard systems, the control regime, the Comprehensive Nuclear Test Ban Treaty (CTBT), and the Fissile Material Cut-off Treaty (FMCT).<sup>22</sup> However, the Treaty on the Prohibition of Nuclear Weapons (TPNW) is not viewed favourably by the NPR regarding the complete abolition of nuclear weapons until the security issues of major NWS are addressed.

### **Implications for India**

In an effort to strengthen bilateral ties and protect US interests in the Indo-Pacific, the US National Defense Strategy (NDS) for 2022 named India as a key partner.<sup>23</sup> The Biden administration is aware of India’s importance in containing China’s aggressive behaviour in the Indian Ocean region in order to preserve the freedom and openness of the economic sea lanes.<sup>24</sup> Regular low-intensity skirmishes between China and India along the Line of Actual Control (LAC) and India’s involvement in economic and geopolitical cooperative endeavours like the QUAD further portray India’s significance

for the US. The NDS also places emphasis on enhancing the military capabilities of India to be able to defend its land and maritime boundaries and interests.

As South Asia houses three nuclear weapon states, and China is an immediate neighbour, India is hesitant to be viewed as hostile towards China and initiate the risk of any form of nuclear arms race and instability.<sup>25</sup> To this end, India has maintained that the QUAD is a cooperative mechanism that concentrates on areas such as climate change, vaccine research, and emerging technologies.<sup>26</sup>

As a result, the US 2022 NDS was unveiled at a critical juncture and highlighted the prospects for the US and India to cooperate strategically and in this area specifically. The NPR underlined that the primary function of American nuclear weapons is to deter nuclear attacks on the US, its allies, and partners. However, both China and Russia could pose a threat to the US and its allies as a result of China's considerable modernisation of its nuclear arsenal and Russia's special military operation in the Ukraine conflict.

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## Notes:

- <sup>1</sup> U.S. Department of Defense, “Fact Sheet: 2022 Nuclear Posture Review and Missile Defense Review,” <https://media.defense.gov/2022/Mar/29/2002965339/-1/-1/1/FACT-SHEET-2022-NUCLEAR-POSTURE-REVIEW-AND-MISSILE-DEFENSE-REVIEW.PDF>. Accessed on November 20, 2022.
- <sup>2</sup> Hans Kristensen and Matt Korda, “The 2022 Nuclear Posture Review: Arms Control Subdued by Military Rivalry”, Federation of American Scientists, October 27, 2022, <https://fas.org/blogs/security/2022/10/2022-nuclear-posture-review/>. Accessed on November 23, 2022.
- <sup>3</sup> Joseph R. Biden Jr., “Why America Must Lead Again: Rescuing U.S. Foreign Policy After Trump”, *Foreign Affairs*, March/April 2020, <https://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/united-states/2020-01-23/why-america-must-lead-again>. Accessed on November 24, 2022.
- <sup>4</sup> U.S. Department of Defense, National Defense Strategy of The United States of America Including the 2022 Nuclear Posture Review and the 2022 Missile Defense Review, (Washington DC: US Department of Defense, 2022), <https://media.defense.gov/2022/Oct/27/2003103845/-1/-1/1/2022-NATIONAL-DEFENSE-STRATEGY-NPR-MDR.PDF>. Accessed on November 25, 2022.
- <sup>5</sup> Daryl G. Kimball, “New Nuclear Posture Review Sends Mixed Signals at Time of Heightened Nuclear Danger”, Arms Control Association, October 26, 2022, <https://www.armscontrol.org/pressroom/2022-10/new-nuclear-posture-review-sends-mixed-signals?emci=a0317cbc-0556-ed11-819c-002248258e08&emdi=cdf2e7c-0e56-ed11-819c-002248258e08&ceid=25230954>. Accessed on November 25, 2022.
- <sup>6</sup> Guy Faulconbridge, “Putin Escalates Ukraine War, Issues Nuclear Threat To West,” Reuters, September 21, 2022, <https://www.reuters.com/world/europe/putin-signs-decree-mobilisation-says-west-wants-destroy-russia-2022-09-21/>, Accessed on December 14, 2022.
- <sup>7</sup> U.S. Department of Defense, n.4.
- <sup>8</sup> Josh Smith, “New North Korea Law Outlines Nuclear Arms Use, Including Preemptive Strikes,” Reuters, September 9, 2022, <https://www.reuters.com/world/asia-pacific/nkorea-passes-law-declaring-itself-nuclear-weapons-state-kcna-2022-09-08/>. Accessed on December 2, 2022.
- <sup>9</sup> U.S. Department of Defense, n. 4.
- <sup>10</sup> Kristensen and Korda, n. 2.
- <sup>11</sup> U.S. Department of Defense, n. 4.
- <sup>12</sup> Ibid.
- <sup>13</sup> “2022 Nuclear Posture Review,” Center for Arms Control and Non-Proliferation, <https://armscontrolcenter.org/wp-content/uploads/2022/11/NPR-Fact-sheet.pdf>. Accessed on December 14, 2022.
- <sup>14</sup> Kristensen and Korda, n. 2.
- <sup>15</sup> Ibid.
- <sup>16</sup> U.S. Department of Defense, n. 4.
- <sup>17</sup> Center for Arms Control and Non-Proliferation, n. 13.
- <sup>18</sup> U.S. Department of Defense, n.4 .
- <sup>19</sup> Kylie Atwood and Jennifer Hansler, “Russia Postpones Nuclear Arms Control Talks with US, State Department Says,” CNN, November 28, 2022, <https://edition.cnn.com/2022/11/28/politics/us-russia-arms-control-talks/index.html>. Accessed on December 22, 2022.

<sup>20</sup> U.S. Department of Defense, n. 4.

<sup>21</sup> Ibid.

<sup>22</sup> Ibid.

<sup>23</sup> Ibid.

<sup>24</sup> Ibid.

<sup>25</sup> Kelly A. Grieco et al. “Experts React: The Biden Administration’s National Defense Strategy: Was the National Defense Strategy Worth the Wait?,” Stimson, November 2, 2022, <https://www.stimson.org/2022/experts-react-the-biden-administrations-national-defense-strategy/>, Accessed on December 30, 2022.

<sup>26</sup> “Joint Statement: Vision and Principles for India-U.S. Comprehensive Global Strategic Partnership”, Ministry of External Information, Government of India, February 25, 2020, [https://mea.gov.in/bilateral-documents.htm?dtl/32421/Joint\\_Statement\\_Vision\\_and\\_Principles\\_for\\_IndiaUS\\_Comprehensive\\_Global\\_Strategic\\_Partnership](https://mea.gov.in/bilateral-documents.htm?dtl/32421/Joint_Statement_Vision_and_Principles_for_IndiaUS_Comprehensive_Global_Strategic_Partnership). Accessed on December 29, 2022.



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