

“Planning to be surprised”: The US Nuclear Posture Review and its implications for arms control

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The US Nuclear Posture Review (NPR), the first of its kind since 1994, was released in January 2002. It capped a year of discussion and debate within the Bush administration about the future size and role of the US nuclear arsenal. In advance of its release many questioned the extent to which September 11th and the ongoing war on terrorism would affect military thinking. In particular, would the need to maintain good relations with Russia and other allies lead to a less aggressive policy on controversial issues like arms control, missile defence and nuclear testing? Also, would the altered perception of the threats faced by the United States lead Washington to lessen its reliance on nuclear weapons?

The Review confirmed many of the worst fears of those in the arms control community. Its findings indicated that the United States is determined to keep nuclear weapons at the heart of its military planning indefinitely. In addition, it demonstrated more clearly than ever that the United States is turning its back on binding arms control agreements as a means of promoting non-proliferation and arms control. Instead, the Review called for a flexible force posture, able to deter and respond to any and all emerging threats. This radical new approach by Washington poses a serious challenge to current forms of multilateral arms control supported by many US allies.

A new triad

Whilst the NPR remains classified, its key components became apparent in January during a Pentagon press briefing with J.D. Crouch, assistant secretary of defence for international security policy, and Senate hearings with other key officials. This outline was further augmented in early March, when details of the NPR were leaked to both the Los Angeles Times and the New York Times. The Review's central proposal entails a paradigmatic shift in US strategic thinking. Whereas current US strategic forces are based almost exclusively around the nuclear triad of intercontinental ballistic missiles (ICBMs), bombers and submarine launched ballistic missiles (SLBMs), the NPR envisions a new triad consisting of nuclear and non-nuclear forces, defensive forces and the "responsive infrastructure".

This shift in strategic planning is justified on the grounds that the current triad is geared towards the Cold War deterrence relationship with Russia, and ill-suited to the kind of threats the United States now faces, and may face in the future. Hence, the United States should no longer structure its nuclear arsenal to counter the Russian threat. Instead, the United States should develop a "capabilities-based approach" by assessing what technologies it needs to counter current and emerging threats, and ensure it is able to deploy those technologies.[1] As Douglas J. Feith, undersecretary of defence for policy, said in Congressional testimony on the NPR, the United States must "plan to be surprised".[2]

However, in pursuing this new level of flexibility the United States risks doing irrevocable damage to existing arms control and non-proliferation efforts. In order to ensure the ability to develop and deploy the forces it feels it may need, the Bush administration is seeking to abandon all restraints on US nuclear planning. In addition, by dramatically extending the range of situations in which the United States would contemplate nuclear use, Washington is lowering the threshold at which these weapons could be used. Each part of the new triad, as discussed below, has huge implications for US nuclear policy and for international security.

Upcoming cuts

Remaining as part of the US triad, nuclear weapons still form the key component of US deterrence policy as reflected in the NPR. However, the Review reflects new thinking

about the size of the arsenal and the usability of nuclear weapons to counter future threats.

The Review concluded that the United States will reduce its nuclear arsenal to 3,800 operationally deployed warheads by 2007, and 1,700-2,200 warheads by 2012. Short-term reductions will include retirement of 50 MX (Peacekeeper) missiles, which each carry 10 warheads; shifting four Trident submarines, which each carry 96 warheads, from strategic to conventional use; and promising that the B-1 bomber will not be reinstated in a nuclear role.

From a high point of 15,000 deployed strategic warheads in 1987, the United States has enhanced world security by pledging to make drastic cuts to its arsenal. In addition, all of the short-term reductions – those designed to cut the arsenal to 3,800 warheads by 2007 – were planned under the terms of the START II Treaty, which is almost certainly dead under the weight of enormous pressures added to the Treaty by US and Russian legislatures. However, proposed reductions to 1,700 to 2,200 warheads by 2012 represent a slower pace of reduction than envisioned by the Clinton administration, which agreed with Moscow in 1997 to cut Russian and US nuclear arsenals to between 2,000 and 2,500 warheads by 2007.[3]

Trust but don't verify

While the pace of the arms reductions is open to criticism, a far larger question mark hangs over the manner in which they are to be carried out. The NPR commits the United States to maintain a “responsive infrastructure”. This component of the US arsenal, also known as the hedge, is designed to allow the reversal of arsenal reductions since they lie outside the scope of all arms control treaties to date. According to the NPR, the responsive infrastructure “retains the option for the leadership to increase the number of operationally deployed forces in proportion to the severity of an evolving crisis.”[4]

The US nuclear hedge was devised in the 1980s and formally approved in the 1994 Nuclear Posture Review. Designed to act as a guarantee against possible technical problems with the deployed forces or a resurgent threat from Russia, it currently consists of around 2,500 nuclear warheads spread across the inactive and active stockpile. The US hedge is comprised primarily of the warheads that were slated for retirement under the 1987 Intermediate-Range Nuclear Force Treaty and the 1991 START I accord, both of which required the destruction of delivery vehicles but not warheads. [5]

The NPR divides the strategic nuclear force into two new categories: the 1,700 to 2,200 warheads will comprise the “operationally deployed” force, and some of the remaining warheads will become part of the “responsive force”. The hedge will be placed in storage, but will be maintained and ready to be uploaded onto bombs and ballistic missiles if Washington chooses to increase its arsenal over a period of weeks, months or years (depending on the system). In March defence officials indicated the ‘responsive force’ would include 2,400 warheads.[6] Combined with non-strategic warheads and inactive warheads, by 2012 the United States will be able to deploy not 1,700 to 2,200 warheads, but closer to 10,000 warheads.[7]

The Bush administration argues that by making the US nuclear force correspond directly with its actual nuclear deployments, it is employing “truth in advertising”.[8] However, it also enables Washington to present its nuclear cuts as being far greater than they actually are and, most importantly, ensures that the Pentagon can reverse any reductions in the future.

PNIs, a mixed heritage

Maintaining the nuclear hedge exemplifies the Bush administration's opposition to

formalising upcoming arms reductions in a legally binding, irreversible treaty with Russia, which would set the “permitted features” of the US nuclear arsenal.[9] The NPR instead advocates a process of reciprocal, unilateral arms reductions outside of a concrete treaty framework. This approach follows a precedent, which President Bush views as highly successful.

The Presidential Nuclear Initiatives (PNIs) of 1991 were a series of parallel, unilateral actions by the United States and Russia to withdraw from foreign deployments and eliminate both ground-launched and ship-borne tactical nuclear weapons. While the PNIs represent an example of unilateral arms control achieving a critical goal simply and quickly, the subsequent failure to implement effective methods of verification has led to persistent doubts over Moscow’s enforcement of the agreement. Current estimates of the Russian tactical warhead stockpile vary from 4,000 to 20,000, and some experts question whether even Russia itself has a reliable inventory.[10]

The dangers posed by a failure to agree a binding agreement with Russia are highlighted by the legacy of the PNIs. While serving a vital purpose at the time, the lack of effective verification measures and agreed arsenal limits in the PNIs has left the Russian tactical nuclear arsenal as one of the main proliferation concerns in the world today. Washington currently has the opportunity to bind Moscow into irreversible and verifiable reductions of its strategic arsenal. However, the Bush administration may pass up that opportunity because of a perceived need to maintain US force flexibility.

While the United States seems certain to maintain the nuclear hedge, Washington is currently sending out mixed signals over the kind of agreement it will conclude with Moscow. The Defence Department has broadly hinted that verified limits are not a topic for negotiation but in response to Russian protests the State Department has developed a more placatory line. In early February the secretary of state, Colin Powell, confirmed that the United States would work with Russia to codify proposed cuts in a “legally binding” agreement, though it remains unclear what form this might take.[11] This debate is unlikely to be resolved until Presidents Bush and Putin meet in May 2002.

Conventional weapons vs. new nukes

The NPR’s new triad shows the United States shifting from a strategic force based almost entirely on nuclear weapons to one based on a mixture of nuclear and non-nuclear forces. The increased role for conventional weapons reflects an ongoing debate over the implications of the so-called Revolution in Military Affairs (RMA) for US military planning. As the congressionally appointed National Defence Panel noted in 1997, “Advancing military technologies that merge the capabilities of information systems with precision-guided weaponry and real time targeting and other new weapons systems may provide a supplement or alternative to the nuclear arsenals of the Cold-War.”[12]

The belief that conventional weapons can play a greater role in strategic planning is reflected in the findings of the NPR. The Review calls for the development of a “fast-response, precision-impact, conventional penetrator for hard and deeply buried targets” and also “the modification of a strategic ballistic missile system to enable the development of a non-nuclear payload.”[13] The development of both systems indicates the extent to which the Pentagon wishes to develop new conventional systems to fulfil the kind of missions previously reserved for nuclear weapons.

However, the United States will continue to examine the possibility of developing new, low-yield, nuclear warhead for use against hardened and deeply buried targets in “states of concern”. The NPR calls for a three-year study into developing a nuclear-tipped, earth-penetrating weapon and also establishes “advanced warhead concept teams” at the nation’s three nuclear weapons laboratories to work on new warheads or warhead modifications.[14] In particular, the review calls for research to begin on fitting an existing

nuclear warhead into a new 5,000-pound "earth penetrating" munition.[15]

According to Congressional testimony, any new system is more likely to be a modification of an existing warhead than a completely new weapon. However, the NPR also requests that the Department of Energy accelerate the amount of time required to prepare a nuclear site from its current two to three year period to "something substantially better".[16] Along with endangering the existing testing moratorium on nuclear testing that President George Bush Senior instigated in 1992 and threatening the Comprehensive Test Ban Treaty (CTBT), increasing test site readiness gives a further boost to those who support the development of entirely new nuclear weapons designs including a low-yield warhead.

A contradiction in terms?

The NPR's attempt to both increase and decrease the role of nuclear weapons in US military planning needs to be viewed in light of the overriding aim of the NPR: to give the United States maximum flexibility in developing and deploying strategic systems. Giving conventional weapons an increased role in strategic missions widens the range of options available to military planners when seeking to either deter or target adversaries. Meanwhile, developing new low-yield weapons gives the United States another means of tackling hardened and deeply buried targets.

However, insisting on this level of flexibility will come at a price. Development of new nuclear weapons would further erode the taboo against nuclear use, which has developed since the destruction of Hiroshima and Nagasaki. In addition, there are strong doubts that a low-yield nuclear strike could be as "surgical" as some argue. A report by the Federation of American Scientists concluded that a warhead with a yield of just one percent of the 15 kiloton Hiroshima weapon would blow out "a massive crater of radioactive dirt, which rains down on the local region with an especially intense and deadly fallout."[17]

In addition, the development of more usable warheads would serve to further highlight the question of whether or not the United States would use nuclear weapons against a non-nuclear weapon state. Washington first issued so-called "negative security assurances" to this effect in 1978 and they have been restated over the last 24 years; it is believed that they were crucial to achieving the indefinite extension of the NPT in 1995. Nonetheless, in private many policy makers in Washington view nuclear deterrence as a useful tool against biological and chemical attack, which can complicate the strategic calculations of aggressors. For example, in 1997 a presidential decision directive (PDD-60) on nuclear policy reportedly allowed for the use of nuclear weapons either to deter or respond to chemical and biological weapons.[18]

State Department spokesman Richard Boucher has indicated that the Bush administration will be maintaining the policy of deliberate ambiguity pursued by its predecessors. He stated that the United States would not use nuclear weapons against a non-nuclear weapon state unless the state attacked the United States or its allies in conjunction with a nuclear state but added that the United States reserved the right to any kind of military response if it or its allies come under attack by chemical and biological weapons.[19] This debate took a worrying twist when the leaked version of the NPR revealed that the US will draw up contingency plans for using nuclear weapons against Iraq, North Korea, Iran, Libya, Syria on the grounds that "all have long-standing hostility towards the United States and its security partners. All sponsor or harbour terrorists, and have active WMD and missile programs."[20]

While it is welcome move by the Bush administration to restate previous negative security assurances, developing new, more usable nuclear weapons and actively talking up the possibility of using nuclear weapons against non-nuclear weapon states will

continue to raise questions about US policy.

Missile defence and “first strike”

In the new triad outlined by the NPR, the third leg is made up by missile defences. The Review asserts that by mixing nuclear forces, non-nuclear forces and missile defences and ensuring that it has the capability to rebuild and extend its forces, the United States can develop a flexible strategic posture with which it can deal with the threats it will face in the modern world.

Part of the rationale behind developing this new, more flexible nuclear posture can be found in the work of Keith Payne, director of the National Institute for Public Policy, which is believed to have heavily influenced the NPR. Payne argues that the Cold War strategic framework that equates “a rational opponent and a lethal U.S. threat with the certainty of deterrence effectiveness” is not capable of dealing with current security concerns. He also argues that with the number of variables and unknowns so greatly increased, “old fashioned nuclear deterrence”, as practiced with Moscow, will likely fail in the event of a dispute with China over Taiwan or an ICBM-armed North Korea. [21] Finally, he concludes that if the United States is to avoid being deterred from projecting its conventional forces into areas of strategic importance it will need a functioning missile defence system coupled with an array of nuclear and non-nuclear strategic weapons.

However, what US force planners may view as an attempt to “strengthen” deterrence, China and others may see as the development of a “first strike” potential. Deployment of missile defences combined with a mixture of nuclear and non-nuclear weapons would greatly increase Washington’s chances of a successful pre-emptive nuclear attack. The fact that Washington’s actions may be viewed in this way, and the potentially destabilising effects this could have, must be taken into account.

The threat to arms control

In its attempt to develop a new way of dealing with the deterrence needs of the modern world, the United States is seeking greater flexibility in its offensive and defensive capabilities. In so doing Washington is reinventing arms control based on trust, not treaties; turning its back on the CTBT and irreversible arms reductions; and seeking to develop new, more usable nuclear weapons. All of these developments pose grave threats to the health of individual arms control agreements that have taken years to put in place. However, the greatest threat in terms of nuclear proliferation stems from the possible undermining of the NPT.

While the current situation regarding nuclear proliferation is far from perfect, it is worth remembering how much worse the situation would be without the NPT in place. In recent years this has been emphasised by the number of states who have abandoned their nuclear weapons programmes and joined the NPT as non-nuclear weapon states, including Argentina, Belarus, Brazil, Kazakhstan, South Africa, and Ukraine. In addition, while many view the examples of North Korea and Iraq as indicative of the failings of the NPT, it was only through the norms and mechanisms laid down by the Treaty that their nuclear programmes were first discovered and then halted.

A recent report from the US Defence Threat Reduction Agency (DTRA) supports this assessment. It concludes that the collapse of the NPT would encourage “states to review their nuclear policies and to adopt more aggressive policies. In the long run, this strategic environment would likely foster vertical and horizontal proliferation of nuclear weapons.”[22] The dangers posed by a weakened NPT are real and universally recognised.

While it is likely that the Bush administration will seek to retain the NPT in some form,

given that it maintains the existing nuclear status quo, a continued failure by the United States to fulfil its Treaty commitments will make this ever harder to achieve. The Bush administration's agenda as laid down by the NPR runs contrary to promises made by the United States under the NPT and poses a serious threat to the long term health of that agreement. A rejection of irreversible arms reductions, the development of new nuclear weapons, and targeting non-nuclear weapon states run contrary to both the spirit and the letter of the NPT.

Under article VI the United States is committed to engaging in "good faith" participation in international negotiations leading to nuclear disarmament. In addition, the Programme of Action agreed at the 2000 NPT Review Conference commits the United States to apply "the principle of irreversibility" to "nuclear disarmament, nuclear and other related arms control and reduction measures." Many will feel that retaining both the ability and the right to reverse proposed arsenal reductions runs contrary to these undertakings.

Under the terms of the Programme of Action the United States is also committed to pursuing "A diminishing role for nuclear weapons in security policies to minimise the risk that these weapons ever be used and to facilitate the process of their total elimination." Ongoing attempts to develop new, more usable nuclear weapons, and a refusal to rule out their use against non-nuclear weapon states raises doubts about Washington's commitment to this pledge.

Implications for allies

Some countries have welcomed the Bush administration's attempt to question many of the existing assumptions about arms control and non-proliferation. Britain, for example, conceded that the current international security environment required "a review of the 'counter-proliferation toolbox,' with a view to countering the spread of weapons of mass destruction (WMD) and missiles."^[23] Others, especially France and Germany, remain suspicious of this new approach. In June 2001, on the eve of President Bush's arrival in Europe, President Chirac of France and Chancellor Schroeder of Germany issued a joint declaration underlining European support for the principles of multilateral arms control, stating, "France and Germany consider that the risks of ballistic proliferation necessitate a strengthening of the multilateral non-proliferation instruments."^[24]

In many ways the United States is correct to question the value of the existing framework of arms control and disarmament efforts. The current impasse at the Conference on Disarmament and the unresolved NPT status of Israel, Pakistan and India point to a system badly in need of restructuring. In addition, the Bush administration deserves credit for breaking the logjam on nuclear disarmament and for making positive statements regarding reducing US dependency on nuclear forces. In addition the United States is eager to engage on certain arms control issues, in particular the Fissile Material Cut-Off Treaty (FMCT).

However, Washington would get a more positive reception to its reassessment if it were able to convince the world that it was based on something more than an attempt to loosen constraints on US nuclear planning. While an increased ability to respond militarily in the world may increase US security in the short term, the challenge facing the global community is to convince Washington that true security can only be achieved by developing an effective binding and verifiable multilateral arms control framework.

Although US allies have their work cut out if they are to be successful in this endeavour, preserving the NPT in some form and keeping track on the Russian nuclear arsenal are two specific issues that Washington is likely to support. The former is indicated by the recent report from the DTRA and other statements from the Bush administration, while as regards the latter, Washington recently increased its funding for programmes aimed at securing and dismantling the Russian nuclear arsenal. The challenge is to convince

Washington that fulfilling its NPT commitments is integral to achieving both of these goals.

Key objectives will be to push Washington to take further steps towards re-affirming its moratorium on nuclear testing in order to ensure that the CTBT does not collapse before the political climate in Washington becomes more amenable to ratification. Another priority must be to convince Washington of the importance of making its upcoming arms reductions with Russia irreversible and of the need to restate its negative security assurances. If non-nuclear weapon states are to be convinced of the value of staying within the NPT they will need to be convinced that the nuclear weapon states are taking active steps towards eliminating their nuclear arsenals and decreasing rather than increasing the chance that they will be used. Upcoming meetings of the G8, NATO and the NPT PrepCom in April all present opportunities for European governments to make the case for these objectives.

On the one hand, it should be recognised that the current environment is clearly not conducive to substantial gains being made in this area at this time. As the United States continues apace with its war on terrorism it is becoming increasingly impatient of European criticism of the way the war is being fought, the treatment of prisoners at Camp X-Ray and its policies towards the "axis of evil". It is therefore unlikely to heed any further critique of its arms control agenda. On the other hand, however, as the NPT is one of the few multilateral arms control agreements the United States wishes to preserve, Europeans may find that it is an area where Washington is more amenable to active engagement.

Conclusion

The 2002 US NPR is a severe setback to the Programme of Action agreed only two years earlier at the 2000 NPT Review Conference. The Programme raised expectations that the nuclear weapons states would at last begin to discuss seriously the elimination of nuclear weapons. There will be a sense of betrayal amongst all the non-nuclear weapon states at the continuation and further development of US nuclear doctrine as outlined in the NPR. This will not lead to immediate withdrawals or threats, but over time, loyalty to the NPT will wane and gradually a larger number of states may begin to acquire nuclear weapons to solve their own security problems. Such proliferation would increase the chances of a regional nuclear war— whether by accident or design— in the next half century.

Endnotes

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