

A Nuclear Posture Review for the Third Nuclear Age

In 1996, renowned U.S. defense expert Fred Iklé proposed that the nuclear drama of the past decades had entered its more volatile second act.¹ Soon after, the term “second nuclear age” began to be widely used among nuclear strategists.² Unlike the first age, marked by bipolar competition with the Soviet Union, the main challenge of the second age would come from belligerent regional powers equipped with weapons of mass destruction (WMDs) and ballistic missile technology. However, this era was not thought to last forever—for Professor Colin Gray, even in 1996, wrote the “second nuclear age can be seen as a period of interregnum between irregular cyclical surges in the kind of great power rivalry that organizes many strands in the course of strategic history.”³

Judging by the language of recent U.S. strategic documents, it seems that this interregnum may now be at its end—possibly hailing the dawn of what can be seen as a third nuclear age, this time including China as a great power as well as Russia. The latest U.S. National Defense Strategy highlighted the reemergence of great power competition as the main cause of global disorder; in the words of Secretary of Defense James Mattis, “great power competition, not terrorism, is now the primary focus of US national security.”⁴ The dramatic deterioration of the global threat environment and the return of great power rivalry similarly

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informed a year-long process of reviewing and recommending changes to U.S. nuclear weapons policy. The resulting document—the 2018 Nuclear Posture Review (NPR)—was expected to change course from the Barack Obama era and possibly provide a new role for nuclear weapons under the Donald Trump administration.⁵ In this article, I analytically unpack the 2018 NPR and discuss its provisions in the broader development of these strategic documents compared to previous administrations.⁶

The nuclear expert community had a mixed response to the 2018 NPR publication. For some, the report represents an almost revolutionary blow to the post-

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Cold War development of U.S. nuclear policy and a dramatic shift toward nuclear warfighting.⁷ For others, the 2018 NPR is a realistic and fairly balanced document that simply takes into account the recent changes in the global strategic landscape.⁸ These divisions, however, are primarily tied to ongoing polarization of the nuclear policy debate in the United States. Perhaps one way to approach them is to understand the 2018 NPR as a

kind of Rorschach test: people see in it what they want to see and what they fear the most.⁹

The 2018 NPR indeed strikes a rather different tone than its predecessor and provides a novel strategic narrative for the development of U.S. nuclear posture. Nevertheless, a careful contextual analysis also reveals much more policy continuity with previous administrations than meets the eye. Moreover, it would be misleading to simply call the report “Trump’s NPR.” The specific policy guidance reflects, above all, the long-held views and priorities of the Department of Defense (DOD),¹⁰ and likely would not differ substantially under any other Republican administration in the current strategic environment. This coincides with the long-term trend in the development of U.S. nuclear policy, which allows for wiggle room at the level of rhetoric and declaratory statements, while actual policies concerning the nuclear arsenal exhibit strong patterns of bureaucratic continuity.

My analysis of the 2018 NPR proceeds as follows. First, I situate the general findings of the document into the broader logic of change and continuity in the U.S. post-Cold War nuclear posture. In turn, I discuss the three dimensions of the 2018 NPR that attracted the most attention after the release of the report: (re-)formulation of U.S. declaratory policy for nuclear employment; the development of two new sea-based nuclear weapons; and the future of arms control and nonproliferation initiatives. Finally, I explore the likely implications of these arguments.

The Logic of Continuity and Change

The evolutionary development of U.S. post-Cold War nuclear posture displays visible patterns of both change and continuity. The partial changes, usually in the formulation of broader strategic narratives¹¹ and declaratory statements, are mostly driven by two factors: the dynamic development of the external security environment and the difference in strategic beliefs about the impact of U.S. policy choices on the behavior of other actors. In this sense, the 2018 NPR does provide a novel narrative to justify its individual policies: the global threat environment dramatically deteriorated since the previous review; Obama's "leadership by example" strategy ultimately failed; and the return of great power rivalry now represents the main challenge of U.S. nuclear strategy—primarily referring to Russia as the only country currently matching the nuclear capability of the United States.

However, despite the ambitious agendas of individual presidents, many policy principles and specific decisions maintain a remarkable level of continuity across administrations since the end of the Cold War. This strong resistance to profound changes is sometimes ascribed to the "bureaucracy of deterrence," referring to the defense officials in the Pentagon that play a key role in developing U.S. nuclear posture.¹² Notably, many strategic force planning and development policies are still informed by the core principles formulated by the U.S. Strategic Command (STRATCOM) in the early 1990s. To a large extent, these principles remain the linchpin of U.S. nuclear policy that has survived numerous alternative proposals from both within and outside administrations.¹³

In the 2018 NPR, the continuation of earlier policies includes the decision to retain and comprehensively modernize all three "legs" of the nuclear triad: strategic bombers, intercontinental ballistic missiles (ICBMs), and submarine-launched ballistic missiles (SLBMs). Despite its salience in U.S. strategic thinking since the 1960s,¹⁴ the triad concept has been contested; for example, Ashton Carter, then-Assistant Secretary of Defense in the Bill Clinton administration, proposed the elimination of ICBMs for the 1994 NPR, and similar proposals were put forward in the course of making the 2010 NPR.¹⁵ Reportedly, Secretary Mattis was also initially skeptical of the continued need for the triad framework, yet he was eventually persuaded that it was still "the right way to go."¹⁶

This decision goes hand-in-hand with the complex modernization program for all three legs of the triad initiated under the previous administration. This continuation of Obama's "program of record" includes developing the B-21 Raider strategic bomber, the new air-launched Long-Range Standoff cruise missile, the COLUMBIA program to replace the current OHIO-class fleet of nuclear submarines, studies for a new SLBM, and the Ground-Based Strategic Deterrent as a replacement for Minuteman-III ICBMs. In addition, the 2018 NPR confirms

the F-35 jet fighter and upgraded B61 gravity bombs as the future of forward-deployed nonstrategic deterrence capabilities in Europe.¹⁷

The alert posture for U.S. strategic forces remains based on what the 1991 STRATCOM “Phoenix Study”¹⁸ called the “twin triad”: SLBMs and ICBMs providing an on-alert everyday deterrence capability and bombers serving as an additional backup for those other two legs. As such, a substantive portion of the U.S. strategic arsenal remains on the high-alert status, ready to be launched within minutes following the president’s order. Before their respective posture reviews, both George W. Bush and Obama made a promise to seek de-alerting of ballistic missiles—a change of practice that has been sometimes been advocated as a way to increase the decision time and decrease the risk of nuclear use by accident or miscalculation.¹⁹ However, their subsequent NPRs—like the current report—found such a move “destabilizing”²⁰ and reaffirmed the earlier alert practice.

Although the 2018 NPR does not envision further cuts in the nuclear stockpile, media reports about the intention to *increase* it²¹ are misleading at best: even the addition of new capabilities will modify already existing warheads and the document contained no plans to quantitatively expand the number of nuclear weapons. Nevertheless, following the post-Cold War practice, the 2018 NPR also expects to retain a large pool of non-deployed warheads (a “hedge force”), which is unaccounted for under U.S.-Russian arms control agreements, and ready for (re-)upload on delivery systems, if required by an unexpected contingency. In accordance with the latest nuclear guidance adopted under the Obama administration, the hedge force also serves for both intra-leg hedging (i.e., to replace warheads on delivery systems in the same basic category) and inter-leg hedging (i.e., to keep enough extra warheads within each leg of the triad to hedge against potential failures of the other two legs).²²

Like its predecessors, the 2018 NPR also calls for urgent investments into revitalizing the U.S. nuclear weapons complex. Obama’s pledge in 2010 to rule out explosive nuclear testing as a way of maintaining a reliable nuclear arsenal was—quite expectedly—reconsidered in the 2018 report. Nevertheless, despite proposals to resume underground testing,²³ the 2018 NPR does not revoke the 1992 test moratorium. Instead, like Bush’s 2002 NPR, it merely instructs the NNSA to maintain testing *capability*.²⁴

In the 2018 NPR, sustaining and modernizing U.S. forces are seen as the bedrock for deterrence strategies that are *tailored* (i.e., adjusted vis-à-vis multiple actors with divergent capabilities) and *flexible* (i.e. qualitatively diverse enough to provide a range of options for different contingencies)—the word “flexible” alone appears about 70 times in the report. None of these concepts, however, represent an innovation in the development of U.S. nuclear policy. As early as 1995, STRATCOM’s “Essentials of Post-Cold War Deterrence” prescribed that the

“[U.S.] deterrence plans need to be country- and leadership-specific.”²⁵ The Bush administration then, under the “New Triad” doctrine, advocated the shift from a “one size fits all” notion of deterrence toward more tailorable approaches.²⁶ Similarly, the early 1990s force planning studies highlighted the flexibility of nuclear forces as the key principle for maintaining deterrence capability under planned reductions in the stockpile, and the 2002 NPR repeatedly stressed that “[g]reater flexibility is needed with respect to nuclear forces and planning.”²⁷

On a more implicit level, the logic of tailored strategies and flexible forces also informed the key strategic documents of the Obama administration. From what is known about the current nuclear strike plans, they are already highly flexible, and the 2018 NPR prescriptions probably do not warrant any changes to the current nuclear guidance.²⁸ As a matter of fact, STRATCOM Commander General John E. Hyten made the following remark about a year ago: “I actually have a series of very flexible options from conventional all the way up to large-scale nuke that I can advise the president on to give him options on what he would want to do [...] I’m very comfortable today with the flexibility of our response options.”²⁹

Flexibility of nuclear forces remains the key principle for maintaining deterrence capability.

Declaratory Policy (Re-)formulation: Much Ado about Clarifying

One common critique of the 2018 NPR targets the supposedly new formulation of U.S. declaratory policy—a public statement on the conditions under which the United States would consider using nuclear weapons against its adversaries. It should be stressed upfront that the U.S. doctrine has always envisioned the possibility of being the first to use nuclear weapons in a conflict, originally to deter the conventional superiority of the Soviet Union over U.S. allies in Europe. With the end of the bipolar competition, the adoption of a “no first use” (NFU) policy was briefly considered for the 1994 NPR as one of the pillars of the new U.S. nonproliferation strategy. Nevertheless, the post-Cold War strategic shift from a global to a regional approach, and the expectation that the United States would be facing regional adversaries armed with WMDs, halted any such plans. Instead, the early 1990s strategic documents prescribed preserving a certain level of “calculated ambiguity” in declaratory policy that would leave the adversaries unsure of where the redline is that would warrant a nuclear response from the U.S. side. For the U.S. military planners, this ambiguity seemed particularly relevant in the context of WMD threats in regional scenarios; one of the key lessons they

took from the First Gulf War was that the ambiguous U.S. signals concerning its willingness to respond with nuclear weapons deterred Saddam Hussein from using his chemical and biological weapons arsenal against American troops and allies.³⁰

Although Obama reportedly sought to include an NFU pledge in his 2010 NPR, the final version of the report did not embrace deterrence of nuclear attacks as the “sole purpose” of the U.S. nuclear arsenal, and merely expressed an intention to “work to establish conditions under which such a policy could be safely adopted.”³¹ The NFU was then considered once again at the end of Obama’s second term. However, given the resistance of some U.S. allies and even parts of his own administration, Obama eventually reconsidered this step—primarily due to concerns about the negative impact on U.S. extended deterrence and assurance strategies.³²

The 2018 NPR similarly rejects the NFU as unsuitable for the current strategic environment. In its formulation of declaratory policy, the document repeats word

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for word some key parts of Obama’s NPR, including the statement that “the United States would only consider the use of nuclear weapons in *extreme circumstances* to defend the vital interests of the United States, its allies, and partners.” Rather than a straightforward *expansion* of the possible nuclear contingencies, the difference in the 2018 NPR lies in a somewhat more detailed *specification* of what those “extreme circumstances” could involve: “significant non-nuclear strategic attacks [...] on the U.S., allied, or partner civilian population or infrastructure, and attacks

on U.S. or allied nuclear forces, their command and control, or warning and attack assessment capabilities.”³³

This reformulation of declaratory policy quickly raised fears about the intention to respond with nuclear weapons to, for example, large-scale cyberattacks.³⁴ However, it is worth noting that this kind of retaliation would not be necessarily ruled out even under Obama’s declaratory policy—notwithstanding the logically permissive declaration itself, the statements of relevant officials such as the then-head of STRATCOM General Kevin P. Chilton suggested that the United States does not “take any response options off the table” even in case of cyberattacks.³⁵ General Paul J. Selva, one of the main DOD officials involved in the 2018 NPR process, recently noted that nuclear response would only be considered for attacks of “strategic consequences,” and that the reasoning behind the 2010 NPR formulation was essentially the same—except “we just didn’t say what we meant.”³⁶

The obvious question is *why* the United States would want to further clarify its declaratory policy. In the view of Frank Miller, an influential adviser in the latest nuclear posture review process, the earlier vague formulation of “extreme circumstances” simply “does not provide any sort of ‘red line’ to inform potential aggressors what sort of attacks are considered so destabilizing that they might draw a nuclear response.”³⁷ However, there are also potential risks in creating certain public expectations about the credibility of U.S. nuclear retaliation to such asymmetric threats. As such, similar declarations may be potentially setting up a certain “commitment trap” for the U.S. president, providing further incentives to resort to the use of nuclear weapons in response to non-nuclear attacks.³⁸ Ironically, while Obama’s NPR was criticized by the Republican Party for retreating from calculated ambiguity in its declaratory policy,³⁹ the new Republican NPR makes the policy even *less* ambiguous, albeit only to a very limited extent.⁴⁰

The second dimension of the U.S. declaratory policy concerns negative security assurances (NSA), a pledge made by nuclear-weapon-states (NWS) in 1978 and 1995 in the context of Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty (NPT) diplomacy.⁴¹ The final version of the 2018 report explicitly repeats the previous “clean assurance” formulation to “not use or threaten to use nuclear weapons against non-nuclear weapons states that are party to the NPT and in compliance with their nuclear nonproliferation obligations,”⁴² even though the 2018 drafters reportedly considered removing NSA altogether.⁴³ This still leaves room for interpreting what exactly would constitute noncompliance in a particular case and who would assess whether the state is complying with its obligations—the formulation implies that the judgment call would be made by the U.S. government rather than the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA) or the UN Security Council. In this respect, however, the U.S. declaratory policy has not changed its course since Obama’s NPR.

New Nuclear “Supplements”: Under the Sea

Perhaps the most controversial part of the 2018 NPR envisions the development of two “supplements” to the U.S. nuclear arsenal: a near-term modification of a limited number of SLBM warheads to a low-yield option; and the long-term development of a new nuclear-capable sea-launched cruise missile (SLCM) as a replacement for the TLAM-N SLCM retired in the 2010 NPR. For the report’s critics, the development of “more usable” nuclear weapons lowers the threshold for their employment, making the prospect for nuclear war more likely. For the advocates, these “flexible” supplements will provide options that are inherently more credible than large-scale strategic strikes, enhancing the effectiveness of U.S. deterrence

posture and thereby making nuclear use against the United States or its allies *less* likely.

The quest for new “flexible” nuclear capabilities is hardly new in the post-Cold War era. During the 1990s, policymakers repeatedly proposed research and development of “micronukes” suitable for counterproliferation missions, and the Bush administration strongly supported new nuclear capabilities with improved guidance and reliability, low-yield characteristics to limit collateral damage, earth penetration, and tailored effects.⁴⁴ The individual programs—such as Advanced Concepts Initiatives, Robust Nuclear Earth Penetrator, and Reliable Replacement Warhead—were eventually terminated as a result of congressional funding cuts.⁴⁵ Obama explicitly rejected any continuation of such initiatives;⁴⁶ nevertheless, his plans for stockpile maintenance under the Life-Extension Program still opened the doors for significant modifications of some of the existing weapons, providing them with substantial qualitative improvements and new capabilities.⁴⁷ In 2016, the U.S. Defense Science Board recommended addressing features such as “[l]ower yield, primary-only options” in the U.S. nuclear arsenal as “a convincing hedge to future uncertainties.”⁴⁸

While the calls for these new flexible nuclear options may be old, their rationale in the 2018 NPR is new. Under the Bush administration, the key mission for these weapons was to deal with hard and deeply buried targets—hence the term “bunker-busters”—in regional contingencies. The latest review, however, situates the development of these capabilities in the context of escalation dynamics within a hypothetical great power conflict, particularly with Moscow. There have been repeated claims in the last years that “the problem of intra-war deterrence—preventing nuclear-armed adversaries from escalating during a conventional conflict—is arguably the most important deterrence challenge facing the United States in the 21st century.”⁴⁹ The idea draws on the concept of an “escalation ladder,” developed by the Cold War military strategist Herman Kahn, portraying 44 rungs of escalatory dynamics in a conflict, from sub-crisis maneuvering to all-out nuclear war.⁵⁰ In Kahn’s perspective, an effective deterrence posture requires an ability to respond to and dominate the conflict across different escalation rungs. The 2018 NPR embodies fears that, in a conventional conflict with NATO, Russia may try to exploit a purported gap in U.S. regional deterrence capabilities and conduct a limited nuclear strike to de-escalate the crisis and ultimately gain a political victory.⁵¹

Many controversies concerning these new capabilities are inherently linked to decades-long debates in the U.S. strategic community about the logic of nuclear deterrence. This is sometimes aptly called the clash between “MADs” (proponents of counter-value strategy informed by the logic of mutually-assured destruction) and “NUTs” (proponents of nuclear-utilization theory, advocating counterforce postures informed by the logic of “nuclear superiority”).⁵² As noted above, the

former camp primarily argues that moves toward the “conventionalization” of nuclear weapons⁵³—low-yield designs with reduced collateral damage, tailored for specific tactical or theater missions—and war-fighting doctrines lower the threshold for nuclear use and increase the potential for miscalculation and uncontrollable escalation in a crisis. The latter camp, on the other hand, argues that the way to prevent nuclear war from taking place is to demonstrate the capability and will of the United States to fight one, by maintaining flexible capabilities for limited strikes and escalation dominance across the nuclear spectrum that are inherently more credible than an all-out nuclear response.

However, in this sense, the 2018 NPR does not represent a major shift toward nuclear war-fighting for a simple reason: this posture has already been an integral part of U.S. nuclear strategy for decades. Notwithstanding proclamations about the validity of a mutually-assured destruction doctrine based on counter-value strikes targeting an adversary’s cities, U.S. nuclear planning has always included flexible counterforce operations, targeting military installations and an adversary’s forces on different levels of potential escalation. Reportedly, there was some support in the previous administration to shift U.S. strategy toward a “minimum deterrence” counter-value posture, with a significantly reduced stockpile and deterrence of nuclear strikes as the sole purpose of the arsenal. However, opposition in the military—particularly the Joint Chiefs of Staff—made Obama accept the logic of much more modest reductions and retain a flexible posture with counterforce targeting options.⁵⁴

The general strategic logic notwithstanding, there are still a few reasons to question the need for fielding these two systems as a solution to the so-called Russian problem. While the U.S. strategic community commonly assumes the existence of a Russian theory of victory through an “escalate-to-de-escalate” strategy, it is not entirely clear what role this idea actually plays in the strategic thinking of the current leadership in Moscow. In the 1990s, Russia indeed revoked its NFU policy and, facing conventional inferiority, Russian military planners seriously considered limited nuclear strikes as a de-escalation tool in a major conventional conflict with the West; in fact, this kind of strike was simulated as a part of the 1999 Russian military exercise *Zapad*. However, many experts on Russian nuclear strategy note that the subsequent development of its declaratory policy, military exercises, and both nuclear and conventional forces strongly indicate that the current leadership eventually tossed this strategy aside as implausible, and instead opted for rebuilding Russian conventional capabilities and strategic deterrence forces.⁵⁵

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Moreover, even if de-escalatory nuclear strikes indeed form an integral part of strategic calculations in Moscow, there is little evidence regarding a Russian (or Chinese, for that matter) perception of some exploitable capability gap on the U.S. side. The United States already has a number of low- and variable-yield options deployed in Europe, deliverable by dual-capable aircraft, and both the gravity bombs and their delivery systems are currently undergoing a complex modernization process. When U.S. scholars Keir A. Lieber and Daryl G. Press portrayed the challenge of deterring limited nuclear escalation in conventional conflicts, they simultaneously added that “[t]his is not a call for brand new nuclear capabilities: the foundation for this flexible deterrent already exists.”⁵⁶ Similarly, STRATCOM’s General Hyten recently testified that “our force structure now actually has a number of capabilities that provide the President of the United States a variety of options to respond to any numbers of threats.”⁵⁷ Even if the existing forward-deployed capabilities are potentially vulnerable to Russian air defenses, there are no indications that Moscow perceives these capabilities as insufficient, or that the low-yield sea-based option advocated by the administration’s NPR would anyhow alter its current strategic calculation.

Finally, the hypothetical employment of a low-yield nuclear weapon on an SLBM brings about one potentially serious strategic issue, similar to the widely debated concerns about conventionally-armed ICBMs: the “discrimination problem.”⁵⁸ The sea leg of the triad is the backbone of U.S. nuclear strategy, with individual SLBMs equipped with up to eight independently targetable strategic warheads.⁵⁹ Despite the recent improvements in Russian early warning capabilities, there is no way for Moscow to determine whether the incoming SLBM would be a low-yield “tactical” variant or if it would represent a large-scale strategic attack. In the fog of war, this is potentially a major source of miscalculation that could lead to full nuclear retaliation to what was supposed to be a “mere” sub-strategic use of a nuclear weapon.

Former U.S. Deputy Assistant Secretary of Defense Brad Roberts recently claimed that, with respect to Russian de-escalation doctrine, “[t]he United States would be ill served by simply waiting for more evidence. Even as we look for more such evidence, we must begin to come to terms with their potential theories of victory.”⁶⁰ This arguably prudent approach certainly has some additional costs—not merely economic, but to some extent also strategic and political—that need to be considered about the deployment of new weapons systems: new U.S. capabilities provide adversaries with legitimizing narratives for their own expansion of nuclear forces; represent a certain challenge for maintaining cohesion among NATO allies; and as discussed in the following section, have some potential to negatively impact the diplomatic pillar of U.S. nonproliferation strategy. In international relations, however, costly signals are usually more credible than “cheap talk”—as such, notwithstanding the related costs and risks, the new

supplements could further contribute to U.S. resolve in a potential crisis and thereby potentially enhance the effectiveness of U.S. deterrence strategy.

Whither Arms Control?

The third contentious part of the 2018 NPR relates to the guidance for shaping the strategic environment through arms control and nonproliferation initiatives. In contrast with Obama's energetic arms control agenda, this issue is significantly muted in the report. Where both Clinton and Obama called for U.S. leadership in arms control and nonproliferation, the new administration seems mostly reactive and unambitious. There are likely two main reasons for this: the nature of the current relationship with Russia as the main nuclear peer, and the administration's skepticism over the effectiveness of diplomatic multilateral arrangements in curbing proliferation and sustaining global nuclear order.

For those who had originally hoped that Trump's affinity to Russia would provide opportunities for new progress in strategic bilateral arms control,⁶¹ the 2018 NPR offers a bleak picture. The document repeatedly highlights Russian noncompliance with the 1987 Intermediate-Range Nuclear Forces (INF) Treaty and other agreements as the main obstacle to further progress, while bluntly asserting that "[p]rogress in arms control is not an end in and of itself."⁶² As one senior adviser to the 2018 NPR admitted, it is unlikely that there will be any support in this administration to pursue new arms control agreements with Moscow unless Russia returns to compliance with the INF Treaty.⁶³ The current 2010 New START Treaty, negotiated under the Obama administration, was directly criticized by Trump as a "bad deal."⁶⁴

It is unlikely that there will be any administration support to pursue new arms control agreements with Moscow.

Obama's 2013 Berlin pledge to seek further cuts with Russia had already proved unenforceable under the previous administration, due to factors such as Republican opposition toward additional reductions, the worsening of U.S.-Russian relations in the wake of the Ukraine crisis, and—importantly—Moscow's own skepticism to the next round of reductions without addressing, among other things, U.S. ballistic missile defense (BMD) capability.⁶⁵ In the context of the U.S.-Russia relationship, the BMD issue will likely further escalate with the release of Trump's Missile Defense Review that is due to be published this year. Reportedly, the new document is supposed to reverse the long-standing U.S. narrative about the purpose of BMD, and include missile threats from Russia and China as a justification for BMD expansion.⁶⁶

There are, however, also some reasons for cautious optimism. Top DOD officials in other fora continue to stress that “verifiable arms control agreements are essential to our ability to provide an effective deterrent.”⁶⁷ The 2018 NPR supports the continued implementation of the New START and, at least implicitly, negotiating its five-year extension (until 2026).⁶⁸ Despite voices in the Republican Party that favor U.S. withdrawal from the INF Treaty,⁶⁹ the report calls for the United States to observe the terms of the treaty and simultaneously apply pressure to restore Russian compliance. In this respect, some of the current administration force structure choices are also being pursued as a bargaining chip vis-à-vis Moscow; for example, the aforementioned new SLCM is framed as “an INF-Treaty compliant response to Russia’s continuing Treaty violation,” which may be reconsidered if Moscow reverses its policies.⁷⁰ This is not a wholly new approach to arms control bargaining—one may recall the controversial 1980s U.S. deployment of Pershing-II missiles in Europe, as leverage to push the Soviets into negotiating the INF Treaty.⁷¹

Moreover, despite the dismissive Russian stance toward new arms control proposals, Moscow still has a deep interest in binding U.S. strategic capabilities. Under the New START, there was no need for Russia to engage in any substantive dialogue on these issues as the treaty already provides an elaborated framework that establishes a basic balance of nuclear forces between the two countries. However, even if the treaty is successfully extended, Russia will sooner or later be facing a decision to either accept a new imperfect arms control agreement or forsake the possibility of exerting at least some control over U.S. nuclear choices. In fact, about two months after the release of the 2018 NPR, Trump reportedly noted after his telephone conversation with Vladimir Putin that they would “probably be meeting in the not-too-distant future to discuss the arms race, which is getting out of control.”⁷²

The (rather expected) decision of the 2018 NPR not to pursue ratification of the Comprehensive Nuclear-Test-Ban Treaty (CTBT) may seem like a serious step back from the previous administration’s efforts. However, there has been no political will in the U.S. Senate to ratify the treaty since the late 1990s, and even some senior officials in Obama’s administration unofficially admitted that it may be prudent to maintain testing capability in order to hedge against future technical problems with the U.S. stockpile.⁷³ To the credit of the 2018 NPR, the report confirms that, despite its stance toward the CTBT, the United States will continue funding the associated CTBT Organization Preparatory Committee, the International Monitoring System, and the International Data Center.⁷⁴

Finally, the 2018 NPR position concerning the NPT regime departs from Obama’s declaratory goals and somehow returns to the logic of U.S. nonproliferation diplomacy under the Bush administration. The 2018 NPR carefully avoids mentioning the three-pillar structure of the NPT—nonproliferation,

disarmament, and peaceful use of nuclear energy—and, unlike the previous review, completely refrains from acknowledging U.S. disarmament obligations under the NPT’s Article VI. Although the report mentions that the United States “continues to abide by its obligations under the NPT, and will work to strengthen the NPT regime,”⁷⁵ it does sideline the process of nuclear disarmament as a part of global nonproliferation efforts.

At one point, the report accuses the movement behind the 2017 Nuclear Weapons Ban Treaty of “seek[ing] to inject disarmament issues into non-proliferation fora, potentially damaging the non-proliferation regime.”⁷⁶

It is conceivable that the adoption of the 2018 NPR could have a further negative impact on the U.S. position in NPT diplomacy—which at the moment is deeply divided between nonnuclear proponents of rapid progress toward nuclear disarmament, and NWS and their allies, which advocate a gradual, step-by-step approach that would be dependent on the developments in the international security environment.⁷⁷ In many provisions, the 2018 NPR departs from the 2010 NPT Review Conference “Action Plan,”⁷⁸ particularly in the NPR’s unwillingness to reduce the role of nuclear weapons in U.S. security strategy, engage in further nuclear cuts, or ratify the CTBT, and that it sidelines the nuclear disarmament issue as merely a general proclamation rather than a policy goal to actively pursue. The situation at the 2020 NPT Review Conference may, therefore, resemble the 2005 event, when the Bush administration’s dismissive stance toward the previously adopted compromise (“Thirteen Practical Steps on Nonproliferation and Disarmament”) led to the failure of the conference.⁷⁹ That said, the divide between the United States and the majority of the NPT’s nonnuclear membership—particularly concerning the Nuclear Weapons Ban Treaty—had already deepened during Obama’s second term, and it would require a truly substantial reconfiguration of U.S. policy to somehow bring the two camps closer together.

Exaggerated Concerns

In January 2018, the symbolic Doomsday Clock of the *Bulletin of the Atomic Scientists* was moved forward to two minutes to midnight, implying that we are as close to global disaster as we were during the perilous early 1950s.⁸⁰ Some media reports on the 2018 NPR would suggest that it is a major contributor, radically altering the previous trajectory of U.S. nuclear policy. One op-ed bluntly summarized these fears in the suggestive title “Back to Armageddon.”⁸¹

While there are undoubtedly reasons to question some of the language and policy choices of the new NPR, the document as a whole does not represent a radical break with the post-Cold War evolution of these documents. Although the worldview encompassed in the new document does stand in stark contrast

with the Obama administration's, its underlying philosophy simply reflects long-held beliefs about the global security environment promoted by the majority of the Republican Party and conservative nuclear experts—including many of those who originally served in the George W. Bush administration before Obama.⁸²

The 2018 NPR remains primarily a document that reflects the views of the Joint Chiefs of Staff and other parts of the DOD, and it is likely that it would not look much different under any other Republican president in the current strategic landscape. In fact, it is not difficult to imagine that apart from the language and perhaps the approach to arms control initiatives and the explicit development of new sea-based weapons, most of the policy guidance provided by the document would remain similar even under a hypothetical Hillary Clinton presidency. Although it may be an overstatement to claim that the 2018 NPR represents a middle ground in the current polarization of the U.S. strategic community, one has to admit that there were serious attempts by the report's authors to compromise on many divisive issues. In many aspects, the report actually seems to be less "hawkish" than rumors originally suggested; for example, earlier drafts reportedly included proposals for a new nuclear hyper-glide weapon and revoking the negative security assurance (NSA).⁸³

Similarly, while earlier Trump remarks suggested that the United States might change its long-standing policy toward "friendly" proliferation by U.S. allies such as South Korea or Japan,⁸⁴ the 2018 NPR repeatedly affirms the central role of U.S. extended deterrence and assurances in curbing this unwelcome development.

The transatlantic debate over nuclear issues has not yet properly begun.

The problem of extended deterrence and assurance of U.S. allies is similarly important in the NATO context, given the post-2014 developments in Ukraine and the baffling approach of the Trump administration toward the alliance. In this sense, the transatlantic debate over nuclear issues has not yet properly begun—although the domestic debate in individual member states, such as Germany, seems to

have already gained a new impetus in response to the recent developments.⁸⁵ Arguably, beyond the current debates over the extent of military spending in individual member states, there is a need to find a new consensus on the role of nuclear weapons in NATO.

Finally, notwithstanding the report's claims about the economic affordability of its provisions, it is still up to the U.S. Congress to provide adequate funding for the overall modernization and maintenance of the current arsenal, which the Congressional Budget Office estimates to be at least \$1.2 trillion over the course of the next 30 years.⁸⁶ There may be an unwillingness among legislators to increase

this figure further—as noted above, there is a precedent from the Bush administration when most controversial initiatives were eventually cancelled due to a lack of funding. As such, it remains to be seen to what extent the 2018 NPR remains a mere “wish list”⁸⁷ of the defense bureaucracy, and to what extent its provisions will end up becoming a means for achieving the goals of the current U.S. administration.

Notes

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3. Gray, *The Second Nuclear Age*, 33.
4. Cited in Jim Garamone, “National Defense Strategy a ‘Good Fit for Our Times,’ Mattis Says,” *Department of Defense News*, January 19, 2018, <https://www.defense.gov/News/Article/Article/1419671/national-defense-strategy-a-good-fit-for-our-times-mattis-says/>.
5. The leaked pre-decisional version of the 2018 NPR appeared in *The Huffington Post* in January 2018. The unclassified final version of the document was officially published by the U.S. Department of Defense (DoD) on February 2, 2018. The report is available at <https://www.defense.gov/News/SpecialReports/2018NuclearPostureReview.aspx>.
6. After the end of the Cold War, all U.S. Presidents—Bill Clinton in 1994, George W. Bush in 2002, and Barack Obama in 2010—ordered a similar review of U.S. nuclear policy early in their first term in office. As such, the 2018 NPR is, already, the fourth document of this kind produced since the early 1990s. For more information about the previous reports, see <https://fas.org/issues/nuclear-weapons/nuclear-posture-review/#resources-on-previous-nprs>.
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9. On the two competing camps in the U.S. nuclear policy debate, see Brad Roberts, *The Case for U.S. Nuclear Weapons in the 21st Century* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2015), 2–3. I am also indebted to Brad Roberts for the “Rorschach test” point that he brought up in our recent discussion about the NPR.
10. The main DoD official in charge of the review process was the Vice Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, General Paul Selva. However, the actual drafting of the document was reportedly executed mainly by the Deputy Assistant Secretary Robert Soofer, the Joint Staff’s Gregory Weaver, and Keith Payne, Chairman of the Strategy and Policy Panel at the U.S. Strategic Command’s Senior Advisory Group (and one of the key architects of the U.S. nuclear posture under the George W. Bush administration).
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12. See Janne E. Nolan, *An Elusive Consensus: Nuclear Weapons and American Security after the Cold War* (Brookings Institution Press, 1999); Janne E. Nolan and James R. Holmes, “The Bureaucracy of Deterrence,” *Bulletin of the Atomic Scientists* 64, no. 1 (March 15, 2008): 40–56.
13. These include the following studies, briefings, and assessments produced by SAC/STRATCOM during the 1991–1996 period: The Phoenix Study, STRATCOM’s Briefing on the Impact of the Washington Summit Agreement, the Sun City and Sun City Extended studies, and STRATCOM’s White Paper & Warfighter Assessment of Post-START II Arms Control. Partially declassified versions of these documents are available at <http://oldsite.nautilus.org/archives/nukestrat/USA/Force/>. For a detailed analysis, see Hans M. Kristensen, “The Matrix of Deterrence: US Strategic Command Force Structure Studies” (Berkeley, CA: The Nautilus Institute, 2001). In addition to these force planning documents, the declassified 1995 STRATCOM paper “Essentials of Post-Cold War Deterrence” outlines the logic of deterrence and U.S. declaratory policy after the end of the Cold War.
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