The Trump Administration’s Nuclear Posture Review (NPR): In Historical Perspective

Seyom Brown
Brandeis University, Waltham, MA, USA

ABSTRACT
Except for the Eisenhower administration’s threat of nuclear retaliation to even local non-nuclear and limited aggression, the Trump administration’s Nuclear Posture Review (NPR) is the most open description of US capabilities and strategies for employing nuclear weapons in a wide range of contingencies. Blurring the distinction between non-nuclear and nuclear war, the 2018 NPR reverses the commitment in the Obama administration’s 2010 NPR to reduce the role of nuclear weapons in US grand strategy. It champions this wider role as warranted by three developments: the deterioration of the Post-Cold War relationships with Russia and China; new technologies which allow for precisely tailored nuclear attacks well short of mutual assured destruction (MAD) levels, and evidence that Moscow and Beijing are adopting such limited nuclear war capabilities and strategies; and the evident desire of other states and non-state actors hostile to the United States to acquire their own weapons of mass destruction and/or intimidation. But the 2018 NPR fails to show why modernized nuclear capabilities are better able to deter and defend against potential enemy aggression than technologically advanced non-nuclear capabilities. Its presumption of controllable nuclear exchanges will reduce the calculations of risk and increase the likelihood of conflicts escalating to nuclear war.

ARTICLE HISTORY
Received 2 June 2018
Accepted 26 June 2018

KEYWORDS
Nuclear weapons; MAD; grand strategy; Nuclear Posture Review; Russia’s military strategy; China’s military strategy/

Introduction
The US government’s periodically-issued Nuclear Posture Review (NPR) reports are presumably candid presentations to the public and the Congress of the weapons in the nuclear arsenal and their role in US national security policy. What should be included in the NPR reports, and how it should be articulated, is hotly debated in the Pentagon and the inter-agency arena before and after publication, as the concepts advanced will become aspects of US grand strategy, diplomacy, war plans, and the military budget, if they are not already. The result is an often ambiguous or self-contradictory document subject to conflicting interpretations. This is especially the case with the Trump administration’s confusing 2018 NPR which – even more than the Obama administration’s ambivalent and amorphous 2010 NPR – leaves a lot to be determined ad hoc as to when and how nuclear weapons are to be used or not used. A worrisome condition,
since hurried choices from the nuclear options available during crises could result in the global holocaust they are supposed to prevent.

Hopefully, those with the authority and power to make fateful decisions in an escalating crisis which is threatening to go nuclear will have thought deeply beforehand about the profound strategic and moral dilemmas facing them. The issues are not entirely new, and revisiting how previous sets of US policymakers tried to deal with them could help those currently in a position to influence the crucial decisions to at least ask the necessary questions about the nuclear options under consideration.

Here then, first, as background to my comments on the 2018 NPR itself, is a summary account of the relevant history – and legacy – of official US struggles with the dilemmas.

**The Period of Nuclear Reliance**

The fact that the temporary post-World War II monopoly and subsequent superiority of the United States in nuclear weapons, which lasted into late 1950s, coincided with what appeared to be the conventional force and military manpower superiority of the Soviet Union and (after October 1949) the Peoples Republic of China meant that US grand strategy for the first fifteen years of the Cold War would centrally feature threats to utilize the US nuclear arsenal in combatting aggression by the Communist powers. In 1950, General Douglas MacArthur criticized President Truman for not brandishing nuclear weapons, and employing them if necessary, to deter China’s and potentially the Soviet Union’s intervention in the Korean War. And in the fall of 1952 president-elect Dwight Eisenhower, echoing MacArthur’s prescription, threatened to use nuclear weapons if the Communists violated the emerging armistice at the 38th parallel.

President Eisenhower and Secretary of State John Foster Dulles announced in January 1954 that nuclear reliance was the centerpiece of the military aspects of their Cold War grand strategy. There was no local defense which alone will contain the mighty land power of the Communist world, they explained. Therefore, local defense had to be reinforced by the further deterrent of massive retaliation. And, in an internal document (labeled NSC162/2) they advised the military that “in the event of hostilities, the United States will consider nuclear weapons to be as available for use as other as other munitions.” (National Security Council, 1953). Moreover, the resort to nuclear weapons was also to be relied on for prosecuting the early phases of war at local and tactical levels, so as to achieve immediate superiority and to serve as a visible “trip wire” for activating the threatened massive retaliation. Accordingly, battlefield nuclear weapons were deployed in West Germany, and dual-capable (nuclear and conventionally armed) aircraft were based in various NATO countries as well as in the Pacific theater.

The Eisenhower-Dulles nuclearization of US military policy was emblematically on display in the Formosa Strait crises of the 1950s when to deter Chinese moves to occupy islands then controlled by Taiwan, Dulles threatened that the United States was ready to resort to “new and powerful weapons of precision, which can utterly destroy military targets without endangering civilian centers”; and Eisenhower said that such weapons that could be “used just exactly as you would a bullet or anything else.” (Brown, 2015, 59, 69, 73). The Soviets, too, in the Berlin crises of the late 1950s, ominously traded
threats of nuclear war with the United States in the absence of progress toward a peace treaty for divided Germany.

In the 1960 election, John F. Kennedy and other Democrats charged that the Eisenhower administration’s grand strategy of nuclear reliance, now that the Soviets had at least as powerful and survivable massive retaliation capability, was a policy of “suicide or surrender”. Kennedy’s pre-inauguration study groups were mandated to devise a more flexible and credible deterrence and defense posture based substantially upon a conventional force buildup by the United States and its NATO partners. Preparations to actually fight a nuclear war were to be marginalized and subordinated to the most crucial and urgent arms control imperative of ensuring that such a war never took place – which led to:

The MAD Era

Ever since the Kennedy administration repudiated the Eisenhower administration’s threat to turn even local and minor conflicts into nuclear war, official public acknowledgments of plans to use nuclear force have been accompanied by insistence that the primary objective is deterrence of wars of mass destruction – not to start or win one. Still, for the deterrent function to work it had to reflect available capabilities and a declared basic strategy for their employment that was credible. This meant that an enemy considering a nuclear or other WMD attack against the United States or its allies would know that to launch such an attack would subject it to nuclear counter-blows that would overwhelm its defenses and inflict a level of punishment that would absolutely negate any gains it hoped to gain by its aggression. Public statements by administration officials indicated the criteria for designing and sizing the retaliatory force was that even after absorbing the largest strike the enemy could deliver, the United States could destroy as much as 50 percent of the enemy’s industry and 20 percent of its population (McNamara, 1968). “Assured Destruction” (AD) this nuclear retaliatory capability came to be called. And when the Soviets touted a comparable capability, Mutual Assured Destruction (MAD) became the moniker for the presumed mutual deterrent relationship.

But when contemplating the actual lethal use of the weapons, not just brandishing them for deterrent purposes, every president (even Truman after Hiroshima and Nagasaki) has asked the Pentagon to give him more nuclear-attack options than those which would incinerate enemy cities, and could jeopardize the survival of the human species (Bundy, 1988, 543–83).

President Kennedy went so far as to endorse Secretary of Defense McNamara’s effort to get the Soviets to agree to a “no cities” nuclear targeting rule, which McNamara and the President soon abandoned in the face of objections from NATO and the US Congress as well as the Kremlin that the idea was totally unrealistic. McNamara thereupon did a 180°turn to champion a MAD arms limitation (and retention) pact with the Soviets – to prevent nuclear war by guaranteeing it will be mutually suicidal. The Johnson administration’s effort to negotiate such a treaty with Kosygin was aborted in 1968 by the Soviet Union’s brutal repression of the reformist Dubcek regime in Czechoslovakia. McNamara continued to work secretly with the military, however, to enlarge the menu in the SIOP (Single Integrated Operational Plan) from which the
president could select limited and controlled nuclear responses to a nuclear attack – preserving some possibility of a nuclear cease fire prior to Armageddon.

President Nixon too found the prospect “disturbing”, as he put it, of having to implement the assured destruction threat. In his 1970 report to the Congress on US foreign policy (reportedly authored by National Security Advisor Henry Kissinger) he publicly expressed his misgivings: “Should a President, in the event of a nuclear attack,” he asked, “be left with the single option of ordering the mass destruction of enemy civilians, in the face of the certainty that it would be followed by the mass slaughter of Americans? Should the concept of assured destruction … be the only measure of our ability to deter the variety of threats we may face?” (Nixon, 1970, 122).

Publicly, neither Nixon nor Kissinger explicitly answered the questions they raised about US nuclear strategy, and they went on to negotiate the 1972 SALT accord and ABM Treaty with the Soviets – based largely on MAD premises. Yet Kissinger continued to prod the military to give the President a range of nuclear-strike responses to a failure of deterrence, well short of the assured destruction options in the SIOP. Criticizing those in the administration and congress who wanted a deterrence-only nuclear posture and opposed preparations for fighting nuclear war, Kissinger charged, “They believe in assured destruction because it guarantees the smallest expenditures. To have the only option that of killing 80 million people is the height of immorality” (Kissinger, 1973).

**Strategic Therapy for Avoiding MAD**

Strategists in the Pentagon, spurred by Secretary of Defense James Schlesinger, worked to provide the President with capabilities for a more flexible SIOP. Meanwhile, an adjusted nuclear weapons policy, drafted by Kissinger, was promulgated by Nixon in the form of the top secret National Security Decision Memorandum (NSDM) 242 and was translated into specific nuclear weapons “employment” guidance by the Secretary of Defense (Nixon, 1974).

In NSDM 242, issued in January 1974, President Nixon called for the development of options “which enable the United States to conduct “selected nuclear operations, in concert with conventional forces.” The immediate objective would be “to seek early war termination.” Accordingly, ”The options should (a) hold some vital enemy targets hostage to subsequent destruction … and (b) permit control over the timing and pace of attack execution, in order to provide the enemy opportunities to reconsider his actions.In the event that escalation could not be controlled, however, the withheld US forces were to be employed against the ”political, economic, and military resources critical to the enemy’s postwar power, influence, and ability to recover” from the war – in other words, assured destruction of the enemy was still the ultimate option (Nixon, 1974). Yet the President directed the Secretary of Defense to develop guidance to the military consistent with the NSDM’s call for a flexible nuclear weapons employment (meaning war-fighting) policy.

Secretary Schlesinger’s April 1974 Policy Guidance for the Employment of Nuclear Weapons, in asking the military to prepare a wide range of nuclear attack options, instructed the war planners to give special attention to the ”control of escalation” – that is to provide National Command Authorities with the ability to conduct nuclear war at
various levels of intensity “within clearly defined boundaries … to signal to the enemy our desire to keep the war limited.” Although no options were to be ruled out, including the targeting of urban centers – indeed, a capability for “holding high-value targets hostage” was re-embraced as crucial for the control of escalation – the commanders also needed to be able to conduct operations in ways that did not force premature or unwanted escalation. Thus, the verbiage of clearly defined boundaries. For example, “Options should be developed to withhold attacks on … the enemy’s highest command structure including soft and hard command centers serving high civil or military authority.” Also, as “it is not the intent of this policy guidance to target civilians population per se,” the planning “will not include residential structures as objective targets [my emphasis].” The meaning of that qualification, the Guidance went on to admit, was that, even when nuclear war was in a limited phase, “Substantial damage to residential structures and population may nevertheless result” from the necessary counter-military operations. Annexes to the document further spelled out the targeting objectives, damage criteria, and other guidelines for the conduct of nuclear war under various scenario assumptions (Schlesinger, 1974).

The public was provided some exposure to what was going on in a series of relatively candid news conferences and presentations to congressional committees by Schlesinger in which he revealed the administration’s intention to acquire “precision instruments that would be used in a limited counterforce role” that would give the President a “broader range of options” such as “a more efficient hard-target kill capability than we now possess.” His explanation: “We do not propose to let any enemy put us in a position where we are left with no more than a capability to hold his cities hostage after the first phase of a nuclear conflict” (Schlesinger, 1974).

President Jimmy Carter’s Department of Defense inherited the nuclear-use guidance in NSDM 242 and Schlesinger’s Nuclear Weapons Employment Policy. But late in Carter’s term, in reaction to the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan and intelligence that the Soviet were engaged in a major buildup of their strategic capabilities, Secretary of Defense Harold Brown and National Security Advisor Zbigniew Brzezinski convinced Carter that the United States needed even more flexibility in the SIOP. The result: Presidential Directive/NSC-59 – which was essentially an elevation of Schlesinger’s concepts to the level of a presidential mandate to the military (Carter, 1980). Carter publicly confirmed press reports that the United States had developed what he called a “Countervailing Strategy” featuring, initially, in the event of a failure of deterrence, selective nuclear retaliatory strikes, so as to “preserve the possibility of bargaining effectively to terminate the [nuclear] war on acceptable terms” (Cutler, 1980).

The Top Secret PD-59 ordered that the pre-planned options in the SIOP for nuclear strikes against the Soviet Union and its allies will contain “flexible sub-options that will permit … sequential selection of attacks from a full range of military targets, industrial targets providing immediate military support, and political control targets, while retaining a survivable and enduring capability that is sufficient to attack a broader set of urban and industrial targets.” Carter’s directive stipulated and categorized the targets that were to be planned options. Like Schlesinger’s policy guidance, PD-59 urged that “Methods of attack on particular targets should be chosen to limit collateral damage to urban areas, general industry and population targets … and should include the option of withholds to limit such collateral damage.” But also, again like the Schlesinger
document, it provided the caveat that this moral constraint had to be “consistent with effectively covering the objective target” (Carter, 1980).

As far as can be ascertained on the basis of subsequently available documents (much of pertinence has yet to be declassified), the basic “if deterrence-fails” philosophy and guidance for the use of nuclear weapons outlined in PD-59 has survived the change in administrations and continues to govern what is in the SIOP (renamed OPLAN 8044) in the President’s “football” briefcase containing his nuclear use options.

President Ronald Regan inherited all of this – including the doctrine and capabilities for fighting a limited nuclear war. But while championing US strategic superiority, he was convinced that there could be “no winners” in a nuclear war between the United States and the Soviet Union, and was skeptical that it could be contained short of an immoral holocaust. His preoccupation was not to make nuclear war more controllable, but to make it obsolete by deploying, as per his Strategic Defense Initiative (SDI), effective anti-missile kinetic or laser defenses that an enemy could not penetrate sufficiently to make its nuclear attack worthwhile.

Reagan’s animus against the mutual hostage relationship that had evolved between the two nuclear superpowers – indeed his opposition to any use of nuclear weapons – was evident in his 1986 Summit with Michael Gorbachev in which they traded total nuclear disarmament schemes, and nearly agreed on the parameters of one before the meeting broke up over the SDI issue. Reagan saw non-nuclear anti-ballistic missiles as discouraging nuclear attack during progress toward nuclear disarmament; once that was achieved, each side’s anti-missile systems could then be also disbanded or kept as a hedge against cheating. Gorbachev saw Reagan’s SDI as a possible US ruse to gain a nuclear first-strike capability which could degrade the Soviet assured-destruction arsenal prior to the materialization of total nuclear disarmament. But the anti-nuclear convictions of both leaders, plus their desire to end the Cold War, resulted in the first major nuclear arms reduction agreement between the superpowers: the Intermediate Nuclear Force (INF) Treaty signed by Reagan and Gorbachev in Washington in December 1987.

The demise of the centrality of the US-Soviet adversarial hostility in US grand strategy was reflected in a hiatus for some four years in official public discourse on the role of nuclear weapons in US national security policy. Even President George W. Bush’s withdrawal from the ABM Treaty, so as to develop missile defenses against so-called rogue states who might be creating nuclear arsenals for themselves occasioned little public debate. The post-9/11 preoccupation with terrorism, however, did affect what the public was told about plans for preemptive, or even preventive, use of nuclear weapons against presumably irrational enemies who might not be deterred by threats of retaliation (Bush, 2002). And internally the targeting concepts for such first-use scenarios quite likely were essentially the same as those in the nuclear weapons employment guidelines given to the military in earlier presidential directives.

The Obama Demarche

President Obama, too – both in his famous April 2009 speech in Prague and in his administration’s 2010 Nuclear Posture Review Report – supported the dominant strategic dualism: that nuclear war would be a catastrophe but the country had to be prepared
to engage in it in order to prevent it. His Prague pledge to work toward “a world without nuclear weapons” and “to reduce the role of nuclear weapons in our national security strategy” got the headlines. But his caveat, in that same speech – “Make no mistake. As long as nuclear weapons exist, the United States will maintain a safe, secure, and effective nuclear arsenal to deter any adversary, and guarantee the defense of our allies” (Obama, 2009) – was ignored in most news reports. In this crucial reservation, the President was giving voice to the core conclusion of the NPR then being drafted – namely, that “as long as nuclear weapons exist, the United States will maintain safe, secure, and effective nuclear forces, including deployed and stockpiled nuclear weapons, highly capable nuclear delivery systems and command and control capabilities, and the physical infrastructure and the expert personnel needed to sustain them. These nuclear forces will continue to play an essential role in deterring potential adversaries, reassuring allies and partners around the world, and promoting stability globally and in key regions”. (US Department of Defense, 2010).

Although granting that the goal of global nuclear disarmament “will not be reached quickly – perhaps not in my lifetime,” Obama nonetheless promised to steadfastly undertake steps in that direction. And he could claim some success – for example, the New START accord with the Russians to substantially reduce the numbers of nuclear weapons in their respective strategic arsenals, and the difficult carrot-and-sticks diplomacy that got Iran to agree to strict international verification that it was not engaged in the production of nuclear weapons.

But paradoxically, in order to continue his efforts to denuclearize US grand strategy – indeed, even to get the Senate to ratify the New START agreement – Obama was compelled by the nuclear hawks in the Congress and his administration to endorse an ambitious nuclear weapons “modernization” program that would make the nuclear arsenal more usable than ever. Nuclear weapons usability was an objective Obama reluctantly pursued. Moreover, like President Carter (another pacificistically inclined president), he apparently had concluded that the Russians and Chinese, who were modernizing their nuclear forces, must not be allowed to conclude that the United States was inferior to them in capabilities and strategies for fighting nuclear war if it ever came to that.

Yet Obama, while conceding to this presumed need to be prepared to actually use nuclear weapons in extreme situations, was not about to totally devolve the planning for such use onto the Pentagon. Weighing in heavily in the drafting of the 2010 Nuclear Posture Review and its corollary implementation directives, he was insistent, first of all, that the threshold between non-nuclear war and nuclear war remain very high and psychologically salient. And he was adamant in his guidance to the military that if that crucial threshold ever had to be crossed, all operations had to be “consistent the fundamental principles of the Law of Armed Conflict. Accordingly, plans will ... apply the principles of distinction and proportionality and seek to minimize collateral damage to civilian populations and civilian objects. The United States will not intentionally target civilian populations or civilian objects” (US Department of Defense, 2013).

The restrictive rules of nuclear engagement were translated into the military’s doctrinal language: “The new guidance,” elaborated the Pentagon’s June 2013 Report on Nuclear Employment Strategy, requires the United States to maintain significant
counterforce capabilities [jargon for directed at strategic weapon systems] against potential adversaries. The new guidance does not rely on a ‘counter-value’ or ‘minimum deterrence’ strategy [jargon for directed at centers of population]. (US Department of Defense, 2013)

Did this mean that the United States was discarding its ultimate assured destruction threat for deterring nuclear war? Clearly not. The guidance was carefully drafted. *Does not rely on* is different from *will not resort to*. But more explicitly and openly than previously, the language indicates that assured massive destruction of the enemy country would be the very last resort in an already massively escalating nuclear war, in which all the lesser options had been exhausted and had failed to control the violence.

Obama, the reluctant warrior, and even more reluctant nuclear warrior, was therefore driven, like his predecessors, to keep a robust nuclear arsenal in-being with capabilities for fighting at less-than-holocaust levels. Technologies were maturing (e.g., precision guidance, lower-yield nuclear warheads, and hypersonic delivery vehicles) that were giving the Commander-in-Chief a wide spectrum of limited counterforce options of the kind Schlesinger and Brzezinski had aspired to put into the SIOP. Obama presided over the incorporation of such advanced technologies into the force posture, endorsing much of the Pentagon’s nuclear modernization program (estimated to cost at least a trillion dollars over the next three decades), not simply to get congressional hawks to approve New START, but also because he conceded to the logic of having a credible nuclear war-fighting capability.

There were, and continue to be, persisting difficulties with this approach, however, which Obama was fully aware of: Nuclear weapons with relatively low and containable explosive yields that can be accurately guided to and detonated on selected military targets could substantially reduce the country’s moral inhibitions against crossing the threshold between non-nuclear and nuclear war. Also, the special admonitions to the military in their plans for nuclear engagements to minimize “collateral damage” to civilians might be having the paradoxical effect of further eroding the morality-based taboo against any resort to nuclear weapons. Limited nuclear war strategists, pointing to the technological innovations, were arguing that not all nuclear weapons are weapons of mass destruction, and their use therefore does not preordain escalation to holocaust levels of warfare. True, not every resort to nuclear weapons necessarily presages a war of mass destruction. But to recognize the possibility of controlling nuclear escalation does not validate the confident premise of the limited nuclear war strategists that carefully targeted precision nuclear strikes will in fact be conducive to a constrained exchange of blows and facilitate war termination. This expectation rests on the unsupportable premise that damage from low-yield nuclear weapons will indeed be containable despite unpredictable weather patterns that can spread the radiation and firestorms and that there will be no serious fog-of-war glitches. Moreover, once the crucial threshold holding back the employment of nuclear weapons has been traversed there are few, if any, other discernable and psychologically salient steps toward nuclear holocaust that can produce a “here and no further” agreement.

Reflecting these deep worries, the 2010 *Nuclear Posture Review Report* – while reaffirming the continuing need of a robust nuclear arsenal, and that the US extended nuclear deterrence umbrella still covered its allies, partners, and faithful adherents to
the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty – insisted repeatedly that the Obama administration was committed and doing all it could to reduce the role of nuclear weapons in US national security policy. A prime condition for such de-nuclearization, claimed the NPR, was the beefing up of the country’s conventional and other non-nuclear strategic capabilities; and accordingly, this was given special emphasis in the administration’s follow-on guidance to the military, directing them “to conduct deliberate planning for non-nuclear strike options to assess what objectives and effects could be achieved … and to propose possible means to make these objectives and effects achievable.” Although “not a substitute for nuclear weapons,” averred the guidance, “planning for non-nuclear strike options is a central part of reducing the role of nuclear weapons” (US Department of Defense, 2013).

All in all, the Obama administration’s stance regarding having a nuclear arsenal and being able to use it in a controlled way in extreme circumstances was apologetic and surrounded with reiterated pledges to make sure that non-nuclear weapons, much more capable of discriminate and proportionate use, would increasingly bear the lion’s share of the country’s deterrent as well as defense needs.

The 2018 NPR

In stark contrast to the Obama administration’s reluctant adaptation to “a world in which nuclear weapons exist,” the basic thrust and tone of the Trump administration’s February 2018 report of its review of the US nuclear arsenal is one of pride in what it will be capable of, once the plans for its modernization are realized. The result, projected in the NPR, will be a force in which

U.S. nuclear capabilities, and nuclear command, control, and communications (NC3) … [are] increasingly flexible to tailor deterrence strategies across a range of potential adversaries and threats, and enable adjustments over time. Accordingly, the United States will maintain the range of flexible capabilities needed to ensure that nuclear or non-nuclear aggression against the United States, allies, and partners will fail to achieve its objectives and carry with it the credible risk of intolerable consequences for potential adversaries now and in the future. (US Department of Defense, 2018)

The role of nuclear weapons, now openly embraced, is broader than ever: “US nuclear capabilities make essential contributions to the deterrence of nuclear and non-nuclear aggression. The deterrence effects they provide are unique … and will be so for the foreseeable future”.

The 2018 NPR’s favorite over-arching concept is flexible and tailored force – and this is to be applied with respect to targets, size of yields of nuclear warheads, rules of engagement, and so forth. More assertively and openly than in previous public reports about the nuclear posture, it evidences that the Pentagon has bought the argument of those US strategists who have been arguing that there can be limited and controllable strategic nuclear war (Larsen and Kartchnew, 2014).

Also notable in this NPR, in contrast, the 2010 document, is enthusiasm for the expansive and multiple functions of the nuclear arsenal:

U.S. nuclear capabilities contribute uniquely to the deterrence of both nuclear and non-nuclear aggression. They are essential for these purposes and will be for the foreseeable
future. Non-nuclear forces also play essential deterrence roles, but do not provide comparable deterrence effects.... In addition, conventional forces alone are inadequate to assure many allies who rightly place enormous values on U.S. extended-deterrence for their security, which correspondingly is also key to non-proliferation.

The non-nuclear aggression to be deterred with US nuclear weapons is not only aggression with other types of weapons of mass destruction (such as chemical or biological WMD) but also conventional or new kinds of unconventional attacks (such as with cyber or robotic weapons) and major acts of terrorism. Other non-nuclear strategic attacks which according to the Pentagon might merit a nuclear response – possibly even a preemptive US attack – include those designed to paralyze the US military’s command and control (by knocking out US space satellites, for example).

Although the 2018 NPR reiterates the language of its predecessors that the United States would resort to using its nuclear weapons only in extreme circumstances, the report’s text as a whole implies a very elastic view of what is “extreme”. It could, for example, involve major Russian non-nuclear aggression against one or another of the Baltic states who are members of NATO; the extreme circumstance could be the start of a Peoples Liberation Army invasion of Taiwan. Indeed, the NPR’s basic stance – conceptually and in its recommendation of specific weapon systems – is of a machismo posture of readiness to nuke it out with any WMD-armed adversary who deigns to cross any vital national interest red line the United States has drawn.

The basic stance of not being afraid of nuclear war is given credence by the Report’s emphasis on integrating plans for it into the country’s overall military planning and exercises. Thus,

the United States will sustain and replace its nuclear capabilities, modernize NC3 [nuclear command and control and communications], and strengthen the integration of nuclear and non-nuclear military planning. Combat Commands and service components will be organized and resources for this mission, and will plan, train, and exercise to integrate U.S. nuclear and non-nuclear forces to operate in the face of adversary nuclear threats and employment.

This integration of nuclear and non-nuclear warfare is to be facilitated by a greater-than-ever reliance on “dual capacity” weapons – especially new or modernized cruise missiles which can be launched by fighter-bombers or submarines and can carry either (or both) nuclear or non-nuclear warheads. Whereas previous administrations have worried about such blurring of the distinction between nuclear and non-nuclear modes of attack, and have sought ways to distinguish and signal to the enemy that the crucial threshold is not being crossed, this administration appears to be embracing capabilities and strategies which blur that distinction.

Why?

Because major potential enemies of the United States are developing the threshold-blurring capabilities and strategies; that’s why, according to the NPR: The “flexible and tailored” modernized nuclear arsenal

will enhance deterrence by denying potential adversaries any mistaken confidence that limited nuclear employment can provide a useful advantage over the United States and its allies. Russia’s belief that limited nuclear first use, potentially including low-yield nuclear weapons, can provide such an advantage, in part, on Moscow’s perception that its greater
number and variety of non-strategic nuclear weapons provide a coercive advantage in crises and at lower levels of conflict. Recent Russian statements on this evolving nuclear weapons doctrine appear to lower the threshold for Moscow’s first use of nuclear weapon systems.

China [too] continues to increase the number, capabilities, and protection of its nuclear forces. While China’s declaratory policy and doctrine have not changed, its lack of transparency regarding the scope and scale of its nuclear modernization programs raises questions regarding its future intent. China has developed a new road-mobile strategic intercontinental ballistic missile, a new multi-warhead of its DF-5 silo-based ICBM, and its most advanced ballistic missile submarine armed with new submarine-launched ballistic missiles (SLBM). It has also announced development of a new nuclear-capable strategic bomber, giving China a nuclear triad. China has also deployed a nuclear-capable precision guided DF-26 intermediate-range ballistic missile capable of attacking land and naval targets.

The non-nuclear/nuclear threshold, rather than being firmed and thickened, and made virtually impassable as Obama wanted, is being critically eroded by the technological breakthroughs much advertised by the Pentagon – especially “dial-a-yield” nuclear warheads. Apparently, just before being launched at its target, the explosive power and corollary lethal effects of an otherwise society-destroying nuclear weapon can be dialed down to the levels substantially below those of the Hiroshima bomb. But the implication that therefore nuclear war can be conducted relatively “cleanly” is disputed by experts in the Federation of American Scientists, who contend that “even ‘low-yield’ nuclear weapons are thousands of times more destructive than the largest conventional ones and risk contaminating huge swaths of allied or enemy territory” (Mount, 2018). Moreover, and paradoxically, to the extent that the societal damage done by nuclear weapons can in fact be lowered to approximate conventional yields, the crucial threshold between the two types of warfare will be just that much more lowered. Yet the spokespersons for the 2018 NPR continue to insist – speciously – that the dial-a-yield concept, actual and bragged about, raises the threshold!

The explanation for how the serious strategists who authored the NPR can in all sincerity hold to the fallacious doctrine that having more dual-purpose weapons and compressing the difference between nuclear and non-nuclear explosions raises the barrier to escalation to nuclear war must be that they have bought into two premises: (1) that enemies of the United States (and rarely, if ever, the United States) would be the perpetrators of escalation to nuclear war, and (2) that the US ability to beat an adversary in a limited nuclear war will scare off any would-be nuclear aggressor. But the proud promise in the second of these premises tends to weaken the somewhat puzzling promise of the first – puzzling in the context of the Report’s unequivocal and flat-out rejection of congressional attempts to ban the first use of nuclear, or at least to require that the administration obtain prior authorization for escalating a conflict to the nuclear level. (The Obama administration’s unwillingness to accept such a limitation on first use, however, was couched in language affirming an intention to move toward a grand strategy in which the “sole use” of nuclear weapons would be deterrence of a nuclear attack.)

The premises about enemy intentions and capabilities – current and future – are the 2018 NPR’s principal justifications for having limited nuclear war-fighting capabilities in the arsenal, exercising them, and bragging about them. The nuclear force posture
implications are reiterated throughout the document – the unequivocal message being that “the President must have a range of limited and graduated options, including a variety of delivery systems and explosive yields”

The reality, despite recurrent official denials, has been that US grand strategy since 1945 has included plans for fighting, not just deterring, nuclear war, even though deterrence has certainly been the prime objective. There have been deliberations at the highest levels of the US government over how much and which aspects of the plans should be revealed to potential enemies in order to enhance deterrence of nuclear war and to discourage escalation (prewar and intra war). But the fact that such declarations are regarded as an essential instrument of deterrence does not mean that the capabilities brandished are designed only for intimidation. The military posturing – now more than ever revealed in the Trump administration’s macho NPR – involves hardware and software, in-being and budgeted, for actual nuclear war, limited or all-out – even against Russia and/or China if it ever comes to that. The sliver of light in the opposite direction, Obama’s efforts to substantially reduce the role of nuclear weapons in US National Security Policy, is as of this writing unfortunately no longer visible.

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author.

Notes on contributor

Seyom Brown, Professor Emeritus, Brandeis University, is the author of *Faces of Power: Constancy and Change in United States Foreign Policy from Truman to Obama*. He has been a senior analyst of strategy and arms control issues at the RAND Corporation, the Brookings Institution, the Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, and Harvard’s Belfer Center for Science and International Affairs, and has served as a Special Assistant in the Office of Internaitonal Security Affairs in the U.S. Department of Defense and a Special Assistant to the Director of Policy Planning in the Department of State.

References

Brown, S. 2015. *Faces of Power: Constancy and Change in United States Foreign Policy from Truman to Obama*. New York: Columbia University Press.

Bundy, M. 1988. *Danger and Survival: Choices about the Bomb in the First Fifty Years*. New York: Random House.

Bush, G. W. 2002. *The National Security Strategy of the United States*. Washington, DC: White House.

Carter, J. 1980. *Presidential Directive 59 (PD-59)*. https://nsarchive2.gwu.edu/nukevault/ebb390/

Cutler, M. 1980. “Carter Directive Modifies Strategy for a Nuclear War.” *Washington Post*, August 6.

Kissinger, H. 1973. National Security Council Document [Memorandum with Minutes from Jeanne W. Davis]. *Minutes of the Verification Panel Meeting to discuss Nuclear Policy (NSSM 169)*, August 9. https://nsarchive2.gwu.edu//NSAEBB/NSAEBB173/index.htm

Larsen, J., and K. Kartchnew, eds. 2014. *On Limited Nuclear War in the 21st Century*. Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press.
McNamara, R. 1968. *Military Posture Statement to the House Committee on Armed Services.* Department of Defense publication.

Mount, A. 2018. “Trump’s Troubling Nuclear Plan: How it Hastens the Rise of a More Dangerous World,” *Foreign Affairs* web site, February 2. https://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/2018-02-02/trumps-troubling-nuclear-plan

National Security Council. 1953. *Statement of Policy by the National Security Council (NSC162/2).* https://history.state.gov/historicaldocuments/frus1952-54v02p1/d101

Nixon, R. 1970. *U.S. Foreign Policy for the 1970s: A New Strategy for Peace.* US Government Printing Office.

Nixon, R. 1974. *National Security Decision Memorandum 242 (NSDM 242).* https://www.nixonlibrary.gov/virtuallibrary/documents/nsdm/nsdm_242.pdf

Obama, B. 2009. *Remarks by President Barack Obama in Prague.* April 5. https://obamawhitehouse.archives.gov/the-press-office/remarks-president-barack-obama-prague-delivered

Schlesinger, J. 1974. *Policy Guidance for the Employment of Nuclear Weapons.* April 3. https://nsarchive2.gwu.edu/NSAEBB/NSAEBB173/SIOP-25.pdf

US Department of Defense. 2010. *Nuclear Posture Review Report.* Washington, DC: US Department of Defense. https://www.defense.gov/Portals/1/features/defenseReviews/NPR/2010_Nuclear_Posture_Review_Report.pdf

US Department of Defense. 2013. *Report on Nuclear Employment Strategy of the United States Specified in Section 491 of 10 U.S.C.* June 12. https://www.defense.gov/Portals/1/Documents/pubs/ReporttoCongressonUSNuclearEmploymentStrategy_Section491.pdf

US Department of Defense. 2018. *Nuclear Posture Review Report.* Washington, DC: US Department of Defense. https://media.defense.gov/2018/Feb/02/2001872886/-1/-1/1/2018-NUCLEAR-POSTURE-REVIEW-FINAL-REPORT.PDF