The Trump Administration’s Nuclear Posture Review: Back to Great Power Competition

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ABSTRACT

The Nuclear Posture Review (NPR) covers all aspects of nuclear weapons policy – the role of nuclear weapons, the conditions under which the United States would consider the use of these weapons, the operational aspects of nuclear planning, force structure requirements, and key decisions on the supporting infrastructure. This document does not only send a deterrence message to potential adversaries, but it is also an important reassurance to the allies and partners of the US. A NPR is traditionally in effect for a period of 5–10 years.

The Trump administration’s 2018 NPR shows many continuities with previous strategies. However, it also implemented important changes, especially with regards to the number and composition of nuclear forces. The new NPR re-introduced two low-yield warhead types in response to the deteriorating relations with Russia and China. Unlike the former NPR, it put great power confrontation in the center of the document, instead of strategic stability. This shift in focus reflects a renewed emphasis on nuclear deterrence and modernizations, and a sceptical approach towards arms control measures.

This paper examines how the administration’s deterrence policy has changed vis-à-vis Moscow and Beijing, why these changes were implemented, and how this shift affects the security of the allies of the US. The author argues that the justification of the proposed modernization programs is questionable, and these steps might lead to a renewed arms race in low-yield nuclear capabilities. This could force Russia and China to lower the nuclear threshold, undermining the security of the US and its allies, and also weakening alliance cohesion and solidarity.

The Nuclear Posture Review (NPR), in general, addresses all aspects of nuclear weapons – the role of nuclear weapons in military planning; nuclear strategy and programming; the requirements to maintain a safe, secure and effective arsenal; deterrence policy; targeting strategy; arms control; what is the appropriate mix of nuclear capabilities, ballistic missile defense, and conventional forces; the size of the nuclear arsenal; the right composition of the different delivery systems and warhead types; and the necessary modernization programs. Depending on whether an...
administration stays for one or two terms, the NPR provides a guidance on these issues for the next 5–10 years.

Since the end of the Cold War, each US administration issued its own NPR. The Clinton NPR was announced in September 1994, and the Department of Defense (DoD) issued a few briefing slides (US Department of Defense 1994a) and a press brief (US Department of Defense 1994b). The Bush administration submitted its strategy to Congress in December 2001, and the press was briefed in January 2002 (US Department of Defense 2002a, 2002b). President Obama’s NPR was drafted for about 1 year, and a 49 pages long summary of the document was released in April 2010 (US Department of Defense 2010).

In the case of the Trump administration, the President issued an executive order on 27 January 2017 which requested the Secretary of Defense to conduct a review and prepare the next NPR. “The Secretary [of Defense] shall initiate a new Nuclear Posture Review to ensure that the United States nuclear deterrent is modern, robust, flexible, resilient, ready, and appropriately tailored to deter 21st-century threats and reassure our allies” (Trump 2017). On 17 April 2017, a press release from the DoD stated that:

Secretary Mattis directed the commencement of the review, which will be led by the deputy secretary of defense and the vice chairman of the joint chiefs of staff, and include interagency partners. The process will culminate in a final report to the president by the end of the year. (US Department of Defense 2017)

There are many different ways to analyze the new NPR. The scenarios in which an administration would consider the use of nuclear weapons raise important legal questions – one could examine how US targeting policy and nuclear war planning comply with the Law of Armed Conflict. Another aspect of analysis could focus on the effects of the new NPR on force modernizations, and the supporting infrastructure. One could also choose to focus exclusively on the issue of declaratory policy. Although this paper touches on elements of all the above, its main goal is to show how the Trump administration’s NPR affects the allies and the adversaries of the United States: how the administration translated the Russia and China threats into nuclear policy guidelines, how it intends to deter these states, what kind of reassurance message it sends to European and Asian partners, and how the new NPR will affect their security.

The paper argues that the Trump administration put an emphasis on nuclear modernizations, instead of promoting arms control measures. The main reason is that it based its new strategy on the concept of great power confrontation, instead of strategic stability which was the guiding principle in the previous NPR. Despite that the United States has been trying to convince its adversaries not to lower the nuclear threshold, the new NPR might achieve exactly the opposite by its confrontative tone towards both Russia and China. In response to the reintroduction of two low-yield warhead types, Moscow and Beijing could take reciprocal steps. A renewed arms race in low-yield nuclear capabilities would undermine the security of the US and its allies, which could weaken alliance cohesion and solidarity in the long-run.
The Institutional Framework of the Nuclear Posture Review Process

With regards to the process of drafting the NPR, each of the four post-Cold War administrations chose a different framework. This has had an important effect on the tone and the content of the documents. In cases where the DoD took the leading role of the review without consultation with other departments and the allies of the US, there has been an increased attention on deterrence needs and the composition of nuclear forces, as opposed to arms control and non-proliferation objectives. Besides, the way the different administrations revealed the results of their review has also been important as this is how the White House communicated its nuclear policy guidelines towards its allies and adversaries.

The Clinton administration’s review was a DoD initiated bottom-up review which was mostly focused on the effects of the changing security environment, and the increased necessity of a hedge force to deter the adversaries of the US. It was requested by Secretary of Defense Les Aspin, and the Office of the Secretary of Defense took the leading role in the process, in consultation with the Joint Chiefs of Staff (JCS) (Sauer 2005, 102–103).

The Bush administration’s NPR was conducted in a slightly different framework: the US Congress mandated the new NPR which had a much broader scope due to the ongoing Quadrennial Defense Review. The working groups which were preparing the document included members of the DoD, the JCS, the Department of Energy (DoE), and the White House (US Department of Defense 2002a, 2002b). The document included a lot of innovations in US nuclear posture, like the concept of the so-called “new triad” where the traditional triad of strategic delivery systems was just one leg of the new triad, or the “assure, deter, dissuade, and defeat” strategy which defined the composition and the number of nuclear forces. However, despite the broader framework and these innovations, the main focus of the document was still on the modernization of nuclear forces, and the deterrence needs of the US.

Besides, just like the Clinton administration, the Bush team also only released brief summaries and slides to the press. This turned out to be a difficulty later, as the Los Angeles Times and the New York Times acquired significant excerpts of the document and published entire pages of the NPR (US Department of Defense 2002c). After the release of these details, the administration failed to control the narrative and did not manage to explain its new concepts to Congress, the military, and the wider public. When the brain father of the document, Keith Payne left office, the administration lost the support of Congress, it could not defend its strategy, and leadership was lacking. This made procurement extremely difficult, and many of the proposed innovations never materialized (Harvey 2014).

The Obama administration’s NPR was also mandated by Congress but in comparison to the previous two reviews, the 2010 NPR was conducted in an even stronger inter-agency environment. Besides the traditional players like the DoD, the JCS and the White House; the DoE, the Department of State, the National Nuclear Security Administration (NNSA), STRATCOM, the Department of Homeland Security (DHS), the Department of Treasury, and the intelligence community were all deeply involved in the development of the new strategy. It was also a unique aspect of the 2010 NPR that President Obama was directly involved in the drafting process, and he personally gave feedback on the document through the National Security Council meetings and through personal discussions with his staff (Roberts 2014; Einhorn 2014; Miller 2014). Allies were also regularly briefed, and the
administration listened to their concerns during the drafting period (Roberts 2014). Due to the involvement of all these players, the focus of the document was much wider than anytime before. Besides deterrence and modernization issues, this was the first time that strengthening nuclear non-proliferation was one of the main concerns of the document, and it was also the first time that an NPR put nuclear security in its list of priorities. As a result of the extensive consultations, the 2010 NPR enjoyed wide support within the different departments, and also among the allies of the US. This support facilitated the implementation of the document. Another important difference was the high level of transparency surrounding the whole process. At the end of the review, the Obama administration issued the most substantial write-up of an NPR by publishing a 49 pages long summary (US Department of Defense 2010). This transparency helped the allies, and also the adversaries of the US to understand the main goals of the administration, and it also created a favorable environment to advance non-proliferation and arms control measures globally. The US leadership and the success of the 2010 Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty (NPT) Review Conference was partly due to this favorable international environment.

In the case of the Trump administration, the tone and the content of the final document suggests that the DoD and the JCS were taking the leading role. However, participants of the review process confirmed that other agencies (including the Department of State) were also heavily involved, and the 2017–2018 review took place in an ever broader inter-agency environment than the Obama NPR (Fearey 2018). Regarding the involvement of the White House, during his campaign period and also since he took office, President Trump has been vocal about certain non-proliferation challenges like Iran and North Korea, and he has also regularly expressed his opinion about the Russia and the China threats. Therefore, he probably gave specific instructions about the main guidelines of the NPR vis-à-vis these states. However, as he has never expressed his opinion about the nuances of nuclear posture (such as the question of no-first use, what kind of negative security assurance would be desirable, whether a sole purpose posture would support the national interests of the US, or what is the future of the hedge force), the DoD must have been in charge of making decisions on these more specific questions of nuclear strategy.

The review process took slightly longer than the administration originally announced – the first version of the document was leaked in January 2018 (US Department of Defense 2018a), and the final summary of the NPR was released by the DoD on 2 February 2018 (US Department of Defense 2018b). The administration released a very extensive write-up of its NPR, and the report is a 75 pages long document. For the allies and the adversaries of the US, this provides plenty of details on the administration’s thinking on the role of nuclear weapons.

The Role of Nuclear Weapons

There are many areas where the Trump administration did not make a major departure from its predecessors. Just like the previous documents, the 2018 NPR also decided to maintain the triad of strategic delivery systems, and continued the investments in the modernization of US nuclear forces and the supporting infrastructure. While it maintained high alert levels for prompt response, it also preserved open-ocean targeting to reduce the risks of an inadvertent escalation caused by an accidental launch. The new NPR also continued the forward deployment of US nuclear forces in the territory of
allies (namely the nuclear sharing agreements with five NATO allied states). Although it did not pledge to seek the ratification of the Comprehensive Nuclear Test-Ban Treaty, it preserved the nuclear testing moratorium. Regarding the specifics of the declaratory policy, it maintained the negative security assurance for (most) non-nuclear weapon states, decided against a no-first-use policy, and also did not declare a sole purpose posture. Following its predecessors, it also supported a better integration of conventional and nuclear forces. Similarly, it directed military planners to adhere to the Law of Armed Conflict in nuclear operations, and included nuclear security in the scope of the NPR. The document also recognized that arms control as a principle serves the national interests of the United States but it concluded that the circumstances are currently not ideal for such measures, which was an important message to Russia (and China).

Despite the many similarities with the previous NPRs, the 2018 NPR shows some very important differences in its evaluation of the international security environment, and the responses that the administration will seek to address its concerns. Probably the most fundamental difference is the much more pessimistic description of the international system, which was referenced throughout the document as a justification to sideline arms control measures and focus on deterrence and modernizations.

It is beyond question that the security environment has changed for the worse since the issuance of the last NPR in 2010. After Russia’s illegal annexation of Crimea, and the infiltrations in Eastern Ukraine, relations between NATO and Russia have taken a negative turn. President Obama’s “reset” policy clearly reached a deadlock, and these developments left their mark on the nuclear cooperation between Washington and Moscow. Air space violations, aggressive “snap” exercises which simulate an all-out war on NATO, cyberattacks, and harsh nuclear threats became the new normal in Russia. The future of the Intermediate-Range Nuclear Forces (INF) Treaty also became questionable when the US Department of State officially accused Russia of violating the agreement in its 2014 Compliance Report (US Department of State 2014). In response to these allegations, Russia also came up with its own accusations regarding US compliance. These problems definitely overshadow the fate of the New START agreement, and the parties have showed no serious interest in negotiating a new agreement after it expires in 2021. The cooperation in the domain of nuclear security has also seen serious setbacks – Russia did not attend the last Nuclear Security Summit in 2016, and it also stopped the cooperation with the US in the disposition of weapons-grade plutonium.

Parallel to these developments, the relations of the US with China have also turned towards confrontation in the Asian security architecture, and the strategic stability dialogue that President Obama initiated with Beijing emptied out. In the domain of non-proliferation challenges, the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA) has certified that Iran had been complying with its obligations under the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA) but Tehran continued its missile developments and the Trump administration clearly indicated that it was not happy with the constraints that were included in the agreement. Regarding North Korea, tensions have also grown since 2010, and Pyongyang conducted four new nuclear tests since the last NPR. It has also acquired an Intercontinental Ballistic Missile (ICBM) capability that could reach the territory of the US West Coast.

All these developments justify rethinking US nuclear posture and require delicate balancing between deterrence and stability in the European and Asian theaters. However, instead of trying to find this delicate balance, the Trump administration
put the emphasis on deterrence needs. Its solution to these challenges is threatening with the use of force, and introducing more and better nuclear weapons. This is a very clear difference compared to President Obama, whose nuclear strategy relied on the twin pillars of advancing arms control and moving towards global zero, while maintaining a safe, secure and effective nuclear arsenal.

In order to enhance the former goal, the 2010 NPR stated that the United States would “only consider the use of nuclear weapons in extreme circumstances to defend the vital interests of the United States or its allies and partners” (US Department of Defense 2010, viiii). The document also added that “The fundamental role of US nuclear weapons, which will continue as long as nuclear weapons exist, is to deter nuclear attack on the United States, our allies, and partners” (US Department of Defense 2010, vii). This was the closest the US has ever come to declare a so-called sole purpose posture which would mean that nuclear weapons only have a role in nuclear contingencies. Although the Obama administration admitted that the time was not right to announce a sole purpose posture, it also made a commitment to work towards this direction by enhancing regional security architectures, and by strengthening ballistic missile defense and conventional capabilities, which can ultimately reduce reliance on nuclear weapons in non-nuclear scenarios.

In comparison to the above statements, the 2018 NPR put a larger emphasis on the role of nuclear weapons in defense planning. The document stated that:

For any President, the use of nuclear weapons is contemplated only in the most extreme circumstances to protect our vital interests and those of our allies. Extreme circumstances could include significant non-nuclear strategic attacks. Significant non-nuclear strategic attacks include, but are not limited to, attacks on the US, allied, or partner civilian population or infrastructure, and attacks on US or allied nuclear forces, their command and control, or warning and attack assessment capabilities. (US Department of Defense 2018b, 21)

The first part of this statement is very similar to the previous NPR, but the second half included a much longer list of non-nuclear scenarios where US nuclear capabilities could potentially play a role.

The new NPR document also added that:

This review rests on a bedrock truth: nuclear weapons have and will continue to play a critical role in deterring nuclear attack and in preventing large-scale conventional warfare between nuclear-armed states for the foreseeable future. US nuclear weapons not only defend our allies against conventional and nuclear threats, they also help them avoid the need to develop their own nuclear arsenals. (US Department of Defense 2018b, iii)

To put it in other words, nuclear weapons “contribute uniquely to the deterrence of both nuclear and non-nuclear aggression” (US Department of Defense 2018b, vii).

These statements make it clear that the Trump administration attributes a “critical role” to nuclear weapons in a wide range of nuclear and non-nuclear contingencies. The last time an NPR said that nuclear weapons are critical for national defense was the 2002 Bush NPR. Besides, the 2018 NPR did not make any mentioning of the sole purpose posture, and how the White House plans to reduce the reliance on nuclear weapons in non-nuclear scenarios. It simply stated that these weapons have an important role now and will continue to have this role in the foreseeable future. Even if the security environment does not justify declaring a more limited role for nuclear
weapons, the administration failed to put forward creative ideas about how to change that, and how to engage with adversaries to facilitate these limitations. This sends a bad message to the international community, including all non-nuclear weapon states, as the US failed to show that it plans to live up to its Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty (NPT) Article VI commitment. Article VI requires all nuclear weapon states to conduct negotiations in good faith to disarm their nuclear capabilities, which would require gradually limiting their role in the national defense strategies.

Besides the issue of sole purpose, the no-first use debate and the formulation of the negative security assurance are also important elements of the declaratory policy. They show the allies and the adversaries of the US when and under what circumstances the US is willing to consider the use of nuclear weapons. Although all four NPR documents decided against declaring a no-first use policy, the Obama administration gave it a strong consideration, and all three major reviews of US nuclear strategy (the 2009–2010 NPR, the 2013 Deterrence Requirements Review which prepared the presidential employment guidance, and the 2016 Prague legacy review) took a close look at the question of no-first use. The issue was debated in academic circles, allies expressed their views, and the National Security Council also discussed the arguments for and against it. The Trump administration, on the other hand, did not show much interest in ruling out the first use of nuclear weapons, and the no-first use debate was not vocal at all this time.

Some sort of a negative security assurance has been part of US nuclear doctrine since the Carter administration. These assurances kept evolving, and more and more non-nuclear weapon states were included in the exempt group that does not need to worry about the threat of nuclear use by the US. In this regard, the Obama administration made compliance with the NPT the only requirement to benefit from this pledge. It was a positive approach as it gave adversarial states a way out, and offered them a pathway to take US nuclear threats off the table if they abide by their treaty obligations. President Trump’s 2018 NPR repeated the same pledge by stating that “The United States will 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 non-proliferation obligations” (US Department of Defense 2018b, 21).

However, just like the Obama administration, the new NPR also failed to explain what it meant by compliance, who makes that judgement call – is it the IAEA, the Department of State’s Compliance Report, or the National Security Council (the answer is probably a combination of the last two). Therefore, it remained unclear whether Syria for example (which still has a few past activities to explain) is a beneficiary of this statement or not. And despite the IAEA’s reports about Iran’s compliance with the JCPOA, it was also unclear where Iran was standing with this assurance. (However, taking into account that the US recently withdrew from the JCPOA, the administration’s judgement about Iran’s non-proliferation record is clearly negative, which leaves the door open to nuclear options against Tehran.)

Although the conditions for the negative security assurance have stayed the same, something important has changed. While the Obama administration maintained the right to reconsider this pledge in case the threat of biological weapons changed, the Trump administration stated that:

Given the potential of significant non-nuclear strategic attacks, the United States reserves the right to make any adjustment in the assurance that may be warranted by the evolution
and proliferation of non-nuclear strategic attack technologies and US capabilities to counter that threat. (US Department of Defense 2018b, 21)

This includes a much broader set of threats that could lead the US to withdraw its negative security assurance, and allow the use of nuclear weapons against non-nuclear weapon states.

**Deterring Adversaries and Reassuring Allies**

With regards to the allies and adversaries of the US, the general tone and the main focus of the 2018 NPR shows a fundamental difference in comparison to the 2010 NPR. Referencing the negative developments in the security environment, the Trump administration accepted that the conditions for arms control are not ideal, and decided to focus on deterrence needs instead. Unlike the balancing that President Obama did in his NPR (which offered something to both aisles, and thus enjoyed a bi-partisan support), this heavy focus on deterrence and nuclear modernizations have already triggered harsh debates in the US Congress.

While President Obama made a pledge not to build new nuclear weapons (US Department of Defense 2010, xiv), the 2018 NPR concluded that a greater variety of low-yield nuclear capabilities is the answer to the new types of threats that Russia (and to a lesser extent China and other adversarial states) represent. Therefore, the NPR pledged to bring back two formerly deployed “new” nuclear weapons to the stockpile. These capabilities are a low-yield warhead for the existing Trident Submarine-Launched Ballistic Missiles (SLBM), and a nuclear-capable Submarine-Launched Cruise Missile (SLCM) (US Department of Defense 2018b, xii).

The NPR claims that the US is lagging behind in low-yield nuclear options and its adversaries are planning to take advantage of this. As Russia has a much larger amount and variety of low-yield nuclear options, it intends to capitalize on this capability gap to coerce, and to intimidate the US and its allies. Dr. Keith B. Payne, the main architect of the Bush NPR, argues that reintroducing these capabilities is primarily about convincing the adversaries that the US has credible options against their limited nuclear threats, and it will help to deter such strikes (Payne 2018). Other proponents of this capability, such as the head of US STRATCOM, General John Hyten also agree that the US needs these capabilities to deter Russia. “That capability is a deterrence weapon to respond to the threat that Russia in particular is portraying,” he said. “President Putin announced as far back as April of 2000 that the Russian doctrine will be to use a low-yield nuclear weapon on the battlefield in case of a conventional overmatch with an adversary” (Quoted in Insinna 2018). He recalled that Russia has developed 11 platforms for low-yield nuclear options, while the US is currently only able to launch low-yield nuclear weapons from strategic bombers and fighter jets (low-yield gravity bombs are assigned to the B-2 bombers and the dual-capable fighter jets, and the B-52 bombers carry nuclear-capable cruise missiles). According to Hyten, however, there are certain situations when air delivery is not the best option as the aircraft would need to fly through a heavily contested airspace (Insinna 2018). Besides, the new NPR also claims that a low-yield nuclear Trident option would bring more credibility to US deterrence, “raise the nuclear threshold and help ensure that potential adversaries perceive no possible advantage in limited nuclear escalation, making nuclear weapons employment less likely” (US Department
of Defense 2018b, xii). The main purpose of this capability would be to send a message to Russia that there is no exploitable advantage they might hope from using limited nuclear strikes against the US or its allies. The supporters of a low-yield Trident warhead claim that it would be a political weapon that is meant to dissuade the adversaries of the US from testing its resilience and commitment towards its allies (Costlow 2018).

There also remain, however, serious doubts about the benefits of introducing this capability. As the US already made a commitment to develop a nuclear-capable Air-Launched Cruise Missile (ALCM), the Long Range Standoff Weapon (LRSO), it is a fair question why that capability is not enough to address these limited nuclear threats. Former Secretary of Defense William J. Perry and strategic analyst Tom Z. Collina claim that there is no deterrence gap, and building a low-yield Trident option would be a “gateway to a nuclear catastrophe” (Perry and Collina 2018). They argue that having only a limited amount of low-yield nuclear options controls the actions of the President and has a self-deterrent effect on using nuclear weapons. If the best response option in a crisis is a higher-yield nuclear weapon, the President is not likely to use it and risk an all-out nuclear war, unless it was absolutely necessary. According to them, the US currently has a stockpile of 1,000 low-yield nuclear weapons, which is undergoing major modernizations, and it provides enough low-yield options for the President. Also adding that the US has over 4,000 nuclear weapons in its active military stockpile which provides enough credibility to its deterrence posture (Perry and Collina 2018).

The opponents of the two new low-yield capabilities fear that instead of raising the nuclear threshold, the new weapons could actually increase the possibility of escalation with Russia, and trigger an arms race in the non-strategic nuclear domain (Insinna 2018). They question how in a crisis situation Russia could discriminate between an incoming higher-yield warhead and an incoming low-yield warhead. They argue that what was meant to be a limited nuclear strike could lead to an all-out nuclear war. Besides, using such low-yield capabilities from submarines could also undermine the survivability of this leg, as the adversaries could identify the position of the submarine after it launched a ballistic missile. Even though the development of such a capability could take place relatively quickly (potentially by the end of 2019) (Reif 2018), and it would not cost much ($48.5 million) in comparison to other nuclear modernization efforts, it could still undermine the very delicate bi-partisan support behind some already ongoing modernization programs (Insinna 2018).

A crucial missing element of the debate is the lack of focus on the root causes of these capabilities. The new NPR is right to state that the international security environment has worsened since 2010. The report starts with an extensive description of global security, and it gives a long list of threats that the US and its allies are facing today: tensions with Russia and China, the nuclear developments of North Korea, Iran and its unresolved nuclear program, and the continued threat of nuclear terrorism. Of these challenges, the NPR used the Russia problem as the primary justification for the new capabilities. However, there are still a lot of question marks about how well we understand the nature of the Russia threat.

The 2018 NPR claims that Russia’s nuclear doctrine incorporates the strategy of “escalate to de-escalate” which would mean that Russia is planning to use low-yield nuclear weapons at the early stages of a conventional conflict to bring NATO to the table and negotiate favorable terms for itself by the tools of nuclear coercion and
blackmail (US Department of Defense 2018b, 30). US government officials and reports have repeatedly stated that they believe that this is the official Russian strategy.

The National Intelligence Council explained in the 2017 Global Trends report:

Russian military doctrine purportedly includes the limited use of nuclear weapons in a situation where Russia’s vital interests are at stake to “de-escalate” a conflict by demonstrating that continued conventional conflict risks escalating the crisis to a large-scale nuclear exchange. (National Intelligence Council 2017)

Former Deputy Assistant Secretary of Defense for Russia, Evelyn Farkas testified at a Congressional hearing that:

The Russian armed forces developed a further means to attempt to deter the West using nuclear or asymmetric weapons – the concept of “escalating to de-escalate.” The rationale is that by raising the price to the adversary – through a cyberattack or limited use of a nuclear weapons – Russia could force the enemy to capitulate. (Farkas 2016, 2)

Secretary of Defense Ashton Carter also stated in 2016 that:

It’s a sobering fact that the most likely use of nuclear weapons is not the massive nuclear exchange of the classic Cold War-type, but rather the unwise resort to smaller but still unprecedentedly terrible attacks, for example, by Russia or North Korea to try to coerce a conventionally superior opponent to back off or abandon an ally during a crisis. (Carter 2016)

And former Commander of US European Command, General Philip Breedlove also claimed that “Russia (and even North Korea) view nuclear weapons not merely as a strategic deterrent, but as practical weapons for employment to control escalation to Russia’s advantage and to quickly terminate conflicts on Russian terms” (Quoted in Payne 2018).

While the Trump team based many of their decisions on the assumption that the above mentioned statements are correct and the concept of “escalate to de-escalate” is the official strategy of Russia, there is a group of academics both in the US and in Russia who claim that the strategy of “escalate to de-escalate” disappeared from the thinking of the Russian leadership in the second half of the 1990s. Olga Oliker from the Center for Strategic and International Studies claims that although this belief is very influential in US and NATO circles, evidence suggests that the “escalate to de-escalate” concept is no longer integrated into Russian operational planning (Oliker 2016). She claims that it is true that since the end of the Cold War Russia has increased its reliance on nuclear capabilities to counterbalance its weakening conventional position against NATO, and the loss of the capability to project power in the Eastern parts of Europe. This made non-strategic nuclear weapons more important in regional scenarios, and in some cases, it might have also lowered the nuclear threshold. There is evidence to support that at one point, Russian strategists were considering “the small-scale use of nuclear weapons to demonstrate credibility and resolve in conflict” – in fact, Moscow has tested some of these ideas during the 1999 Zapad Exercise. But President Yeltsin concluded that these scenarios were not plausible, and he directed to abandon planning for the execution of these de-escalatory nuclear strikes. This notion is further supported by Russia’s most recent modernization efforts which are still primarily focused on building the next generation of strategic nuclear capabilities, and the exercises Moscow has conducted over the past few years are also mostly centered around the use of strategic nuclear forces in a strategic role (Oliker 2016).
Besides Oliker, French strategic analyst Bruno Tertrais also examined the evidence that is publicly available, and he similarly concluded that the strategy of “escalate to de-escalate” is not reflected in Russian military exercises, or the official nuclear doctrine and public statements of the leadership.

All the elements of this narrative, however, rely on weak evidence – and there is strong evidence to counter most of them. This applies to the role of nuclear weapons in Russian military exercises. [...] Exercises are important in understanding Russian nuclear posture, because, as the saying goes, Moscow trains as it fights and fights as it trains. So what do large-scale ones such as Zapad (Western front) and Vostok (Eastern front) tell us? What they tell us is that the last time a Zapad included nuclear use was almost 20 years ago, in 1999 – Russia was explicit about it – and that no known large-scale theatre military exercise has included nuclear weapons use for at least a decade. This is unsurprising: Russia now “wins” – or at least “resists” – without nuclear weapons. (Tertrais 2018)

Naturally, this does not mean that Russia does not have the capabilities to execute these types of strikes but before developing new nuclear weapons to deter Moscow, the West should understand Russia better. Otherwise, Washington risks to create a problem and an unnecessary arms race in response to a non-existent threat. Academics obviously do not have access to classified documents or intelligence reports but their skepticism about “escalate to de-escalate” is noteworthy when no hard evidence in the public domain supports this concept.

Another important implication of the debate is that by focusing so much on the nuclear threshold the West overlooks an important aspect of Russian activities. Alternative explanations to “escalate to de-escalate” suggest that what Russia is really doing is closer to the concept of “escalation control” at lower levels of a conflict. Over the past few years, Russia has focused on an all-domain approach to deterrence which means that besides the modernization of their nuclear capabilities, they have increased their investments in conventional precision strike, and information warfare. This also entails the development of more dual-use capabilities to increase the ambiguity about their intentions and to complicate the strategic calculations of their adversaries. The tactics of hybrid and information warfare have become increasingly important for Moscow (Noonan 2017).

Due to these new capabilities, Russia might do the opposite of lowering the nuclear threshold. According to Jay Ross:

Escalation control is the concept that best accounts for the range of military and diplomatic actions the Kremlin has taken in recent years. This framework, specifically applied to Russian strategy, outlines a proactive approach to controlling the process of escalation rather than militarily defeating the adversary at any given escalation level. It requires Russia to maintain the initiative in a conflict, an area in which it has excelled. (Ross 2018)

Ross mentioned the example of Ukraine after Crimea, and the example of Syria in 2015–2016. During the Syria crisis, Moscow deployed the S-400 and S-300 air defense systems, fighter aircraft and artillery to limit NATO’s maneuvering capability without crossing a threshold that would lead to a nuclear exchange. Although Russia could have implemented stronger steps to claim a military victory in Syria and Ukraine, it was deliberately operating under the escalation thresholds of the West and achieved many of its goals at lower levels of the crisis. In both cases, Western deterrence was effective at the higher levels (showing that NATO’s nuclear posture is still efficient to deter a
nuclear confrontation), but Russia’s proactive escalation control strategy was a success in the lower tiers of conflict in two theaters with the potential of a NATO/US confrontation (Ross 2018). This means that focusing exclusively on the nuclear threshold allows Russia a grey zone of operation where it can coerce military advantages from NATO by proactive military aggression, and the new low-yield nuclear capabilities might not be the best tools to address this challenge.

Regarding Russia and the new low-yield nuclear capabilities, it is also important that the 2014 Wales Summit (NATO 2014), the 2016 Warsaw Summit (NATO 2016) and the 2018 Brussels Summit of NATO have all concluded that there was no need for parity in the non-strategic nuclear domain with Russia, and the current mix of nuclear, conventional and missile defense capabilities was adequate to address the challenge. In fact, all of these documents reaffirmed the commitment of the Alliance to global zero, and supported reciprocal reductions through a negotiated framework with Moscow. It is true that allies on the Eastern flanks are deeply worried for their security but they did not ask for additional low-yield nuclear options to address their concerns. Both Poland and the Baltic states prefer more boots on the ground (Poland’s recent request to establish a permanent US base on its territory underlines this point). If the US decision to restore the nuclear SLCM capability, and the introduction of a low explosive yield SLBM warhead trigger an arms race in the domain of non-strategic nuclear weapons, primarily the security of European allies would suffer the consequences, and NATO cohesion and solidarity could experience serious setbacks.

Regarding China, it was the big innovation of the 2010 NPR that China, for the first time, was mentioned in the same group as Russia. The Obama posture referred to China as a country with whom the US had several common interests, and cooperation was possible in many areas. Therefore, the US initiated a strategic stability dialogue with Beijing, and tried to identify issues of mutual interest. The new NPR, on the other hand, addressed China in a more confrontative tone, and just like in the case of Russia, the intention to strengthen strategic stability was replaced by the concept of great power competition. China has undoubtedly grown into the world’s second largest economic power, and it comes with a lot of confidence in the international arena. China has also invested a lot in its theater nuclear capabilities, made improvements in a road-mobile ICBM, made important advancements in the domain of multiple independently targetable re-entry vehicles (MIRV), precision hypersonic boost-glide missiles, dual-capable medium and intermediate-range missiles, as well as antisatellite weapons (Kristensen and Norris 2018; Panda 2018). Due to these developments, the Trump NPR named China an adversary, and it stated that “Russia and China are pursuing asymmetric ways and means to counter US conventional capabilities, thereby increasing the risk of miscalculation and the potential for military confrontation with the United States, its allies, and partners” (US Department of Defense 2018b, 11). The document also added that due to the lack of transparency in Chinese military planning and force modernizations, questions remain about their future intentions, and the current doctrine might be changed. However, while the lack of a clear understanding of China was acknowledged as a problem, the new NPR did not offer any practical steps to resolve this. Similarly, the US stated that the strategic stability dialogue was stuck with Beijing, but it also remained silent on how to engage them again, and how to think about arms control measures with China.
Although the new low-yield nuclear capabilities were meant to deter Russia, the NPR also left room for speculation that these low-yield capabilities could play a role in the Asia-Pacific. According to the new nuclear strategy:

The United States is prepared to respond decisively to Chinese non-nuclear or nuclear aggression. US exercises in the Asia-Pacific region, among other objectives, demonstrate this preparedness, as will increasing the range of graduated nuclear response options available to the President. (US Department of Defense 2018b, 31)

Despite the intentions of the White House, this wrong signaling have already fueled some Chinese hardliners to advocate for their own low-yield nuclear capability.

China’s nuclear doctrine rests on the pillars of not using nuclear weapons first (which has been an official doctrine since China's first nuclear test in 1964), not using nuclear weapons against non-nuclear weapon states or in nuclear weapon-free zones, and the belief that an assured second-strike capability is enough for effective deterrence (Kristensen and Norris 2018). Despite the ongoing modernization efforts, there is no indication at this point, that China wants to implement changes in any of these declarations. Neither its posture, nor its nuclear forces suggest that China would believe in the notion of limited nuclear use. However, in response to the leaked 2018 NPR, hardliners argued that the changes of US nuclear doctrine might render China’s assured second-strike capability insufficient and Beijing should consider developing its own low-yield capability (Wang 2018).

Despite these recommendations, Ren Guoqiang, a spokesman from China’s Ministry of National Defense reaffirmed that China continues to maintain the policy of no-first use, and he “firmly opposed” to the language of the NPR about China. The Chairwoman of China’s National People’s Congress Foreign Affairs Committee Fu Ying expressed similar views at the Munich Security Conference (Yeo 2018). Thus – for now – a Chinese low-yield option was rejected but the US should be more careful in its signaling policy, and take into account how certain anti-Russian steps and rhetorical threats affect the strategic balance in other theaters.

From the perspective of Asian allies, it was important that the new NPR reaffirmed US commitment towards their defense. Besides the nuclear umbrella that covers both South Korea and Japan, both of them have a strong missile defense cooperation with Washington which will continue against threats from North Korea and China as well – South Korea already started the deployment of the Terminal High Altitude Area Defense (THAAD) system, while Japan is cooperating with the US in the Patriot system. These measures, however, are believed to undermine Chinese deterrence capabilities, and Beijing has been very vocal about its objections. Therefore, the new capabilities that the US has decided to develop against Russia (which could also be used against China), the defense cooperation Washington is maintaining with its Asian allies, and the harsh rhetoric it uses against Beijing provide plenty of justification for further modernization efforts by China.

Taking into account all the uncertainties about the Russian escalation strategy, the potential negative consequences of a new arms race in the non-strategic nuclear weapons domain, and the effects of the new NPR on China, Washington should reconsider its approach towards both states, and invest more political capital in the strategic stability dialogues. In the former NPR, the concept of strategic stability was the organizing principle with Russia and China as well. Accordingly, the Department of
State conducted a diplomatic dialogue with Moscow and Beijing to identify those territories where cooperation was possible, and to lay down the framework of a stable great power relationship. Although these channels remain open, the 2018 NPR did not pay much attention to them. There was absolutely no discussion on how to redefine and bring content to these dialogues, and the White House accepted that they reached a deadlock. Instead of creating new incentives for these talks, the Trump NPR blamed Russia’s and China’s aggressive behavior, and it reflected a return to great power confrontation with both (US Department of Defense 2018b, 8–11).

This, however, is a dangerous decision as allies in Europe and Asia might get into the crossfire between these powers. From the perspective of allies, it was reassuring that despite the campaign promises to abandon the allies who are not willing to pay for their security, President Trump and his nuclear strategy have maintained US commitment to protect the allies. Some of these allies might even welcome the stronger tone of the administration towards the countries which threaten their security, but it is not in their interest to get caught between the great powers. Not to mention that alliance relations are currently heavily burdened by a number of issues, like the US withdrawal of the JCPOA which the European allies were very upset about, or the constant trade arguments that re-imposed several tariffs between the US and Europe. As it is already a difficult time within NATO, member states do not need another source of disagreement. Therefore, it is not just the US-Russia relations that would benefit from efforts to revive the strategic stability dialogue but allies would also be safer if the great powers would do everything to avoid misunderstandings and miscalculations in their neighborhood. Similarly, Asian allies would also benefit from a normalization of relations between Washington and Beijing, especially because it could facilitate a meaningful solution to the North Korea nuclear challenge as well.

Arms Control

One of the most striking differences between the Obama posture and the 2018 NPR is that the new strategy did not seek a balance between the modernization of nuclear forces and deterrence, and arms control measures. Although the Trump posture reaffirmed the commitment of the US towards the NPT and global zero, but it made no mention of Article VI of the treaty, and it clearly stated that the circumstances were not right for arms control (US Department of Defense 2018b, xvi–xvii). This will complicate the upcoming NPT Review Conference (RevCon) in 2020 which is already under pressure by the disagreements over the Nuclear Ban Treaty, and the US withdrawal from the JCPOA. The 2010 RevCon was a success because the US took leadership, it invested a lot of effort in arms control and nuclear security, and it also showed a positive example in the 2010 NPR which reduced the role of nuclear weapons in US defense planning. Instead of taking a step forward, the Trump NPR has taken a backwards turn in arms control and expanded the role of nuclear weapons. Thus, nuclear weapon states will face further criticism from the non-nuclear weapon states for not fulfilling their Article VI commitment, which is still the only legally binding obligation that forces all five nuclear weapon states to move towards global zero. If the next NPT RevCon will be a complete failure, it could pave the way towards the long term erosion of the agreement.

In light of the problems with Russia and China, and the growing insecurity in great power relations, the chances of an inadvertent confrontation have dramatically grown which means that preserving the remaining few arms control measures have become...
even more important. The new NPR acknowledged that arms control is in the national interests of the US (US Department of Defense 2018b, xvi–xvii). It brings transparency and predictability into the relations, and it also maintains channels of communication in times when the political relations are constrained. One of the most alarming aspects of US–Russia relations is that in the past two decades many of the arms control agreements have fallen victim to disagreements between these states, and by now we lost almost all measures in conventional arms control. Besides, in December 2001 the Bush administration gave notice of its intention to withdraw from the ABM Treaty, which Russia still uses as a justification for many of its aggressive steps and modernization efforts.

The nuclear domain has also seen serious setbacks. Both Washington and Moscow accused each other of violating the INF Treaty which used to be (and still is) one of the cornerstones of the European security architecture. In this regard, the new NPR did not address the Russian concerns about the potential sources of the US violation, and it also did not offer any specific roadmap on how to handle the deadlock, and how to revive the diplomatic dialogue to resolve the issue. Instead, President Trump’s NPR suggests that the low-yield nuclear SLCM could be a bargaining chip in the negotiations with Russia on the INF Treaty (Mehta 2018). There is, however, no evidence that this strategy will work. The new SLCM is meant to provide a response to Moscow’s violation of the INF by the testing and deployment of a Ground-Launched Cruise Missile (GLCM), and to a lesser extent, the growing missile capabilities of China and North Korea. Although the SLCM is an INF-compliant step but it is still unlikely to bring Russia back into compliance. Until very recently, the US Navy had a non-strategic nuclear capability, the Tomahawk TLAM-N weapons, which were retired by the 2010 NPR. Russia’s desire to reintroduce INF weapons in its stockpile dates back much before that. Therefore, its reintroduction will not change Moscow’s intention to move on with its GLCM program. In fact, with the LRSO and the new low-yield Trident weapons, US modernizations might just convince Russia that these non-strategic nuclear developments are essential.

Besides the SLCM capability, the Trump administration also provided the funding for research and development of a ground-launched, intermediate-range cruise missile to counter the Russian GLCM weapon (Weisgerber 2018). Research and development in itself do not violate the INF agreement but if the US moves on with the deployment of this capability, then the INF Treaty cannot be saved. With the fall of the INF Treaty, Russia could openly re-deploy its land-based intermediate-range systems, which would seriously harm European security, and directly threaten the allies of the US Not to mention the devastating effect it might have on the future of the New START Treaty. If the INF Treaty is dead, Congress will not support any new arms control measure in the foreseeable future, which could be problematic with regards to the fate of the New START agreement which needs to be extended or renegotiated soon if the US does not want to lose transparency and verification in the domain of strategic nuclear capabilities.

In the new NPR, the Trump administration expressed its support to the New START but it also added that Washington is not interested in concluding a new treaty with a state that is actively violating arms control agreements (US Department of Defense 2018b, xvi–xvii). Thus, in the new NPR, there was no further discussion about the continuation of the process, and the practical measures the administration...
is planning to take to keep the strategic arms control process alive. This could mean that the 2021 expiration of the New START would end five decades of strategic arms control between the United States and Russia. Despite the fact that during the Obama administration’s Deterrence Requirements Review (which led to the 2013 presidential employment guidance document) the US military concluded that an additional one third reduction was possible in the deployed strategic nuclear capabilities, the Trump NPR did not say anything about further reductions in these stockpiles (US Department of Defense 2013). As the chances of miscalculation are so high already, the loss of verification and transparency would only further aggravate the situation between Washington and Moscow.

Conclusions

Altogether, the new NPR is a mix of continuity and change. Breaking with the legacy of the former administration, the 2018 NPR gave up on the balance between arms control, and maintaining a safe, secure and effective nuclear arsenal. The new nuclear strategy shifted its focus towards the maintenance and the modernization of nuclear forces. The evaluation of the document is very pessimistic about the international security environment. Instead of promoting strategic stability, it accepted a return to great power confrontation with Russia and China, and it formulated harsh threats against proliferator states like Iran and North Korea. As a result, arms control efforts were sidelined, and nuclear modernizations and the reintroduction of two low-yield warhead types were identified as priorities.

Despite confirming that arms control still serves the national interests of the United States and its allies, the new NPR did not formulate any concrete recommendations to save the deadlocked INF Treaty, and to extend the New START agreement. In addition, the administration also slightly widened the contingencies when nuclear weapons could be used, especially in the domain of non-nuclear scenarios. This is an important change compared to the last NPR, and a dangerous message to adversaries. The non-nuclear weapon states of the NPT are also likely to criticize the new US strategy for not advancing arms control measures, and for not moving fast enough towards the ultimate goal of global zero. This will leave a mark on the upcoming 2020 RevCon.

Although the administration put a lot of effort into convincing its adversaries not to lower the nuclear threshold, the 2018 NPR could lead to exactly opposite results. The US modernization efforts could trigger reciprocal measures in Russia and China, and the confrontative language of the administration could also make North Korea and Iran less cooperative. All of these developments undermine the security of the US and its allies, and they could significantly weaken alliance cohesion and solidarity as well.

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No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author.

Notes on Contributor

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