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ANALYSIS

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NUCLEAR WEAPONS AND AMERICAN STRATEGY IN THE AGE OF OBAMA

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Barack Obama's Nuclear Posture Review (NPR) leaves the most important questions about America's nuclear forces unanswered. Despite Obama's aspirations to abolish nuclear weapons, the new NPR does not significantly reduce their roles in America's strategic posture, and in some ways even seems to expand them.

The NPR envisages no early reduction in the role of nuclear weapons in conflicts with states that possess or are deemed to be seeking nuclear weapons – the only ones that nuclear forces might have been used against anyway. The hopes it expresses for a smaller role for nuclear weapons in the longer term presuppose that America's edge in conventional capabilities expands in future, which is far from assured. It prioritises the problems of nuclear proliferation and nuclear terrorism, but offers no new ideas about how to manage them.

It appears to expand America's commitment to use nuclear weapons to help defend allies and partners, and it evades the really central question of how to prevent nuclear strategic issues destabilising the US-China relationship. Most fundamentally, it fails to embed US nuclear strategic policy in a robust and credible vision of America's role in a rapidly changing world.

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NUCLEAR WEAPONS AND AMERICAN STRATEGY IN THE AGE OF OBAMA

Barack Obama's *Nuclear Posture Review*[1] (NPR) released in April 2010 is a disappointment to those who had looked to the Obama Administration to move America's nuclear posture out from the shadow of the Cold War and produce a new rationale for American nuclear forces that more clearly supports American strategic interests and security concerns.[2] Unfortunately, beneath an appearance of progress, little really has changed from the nuclear posture that George W. Bush left behind. The most pressing and important questions about America's nuclear forces remain to be answered.

This paper examines how the NPR addresses the four most important of these questions.

- First, how will President Obama change America's nuclear posture to promote the eventual abolition of nuclear weapons? The credibility of Obama's claim to be serious about starting the journey towards abolition depends a great deal on how his NPR describes the functions of nuclear weapons in America's strategic posture.

- Second, how will America's nuclear posture adapt to the high-profile threats of nuclear proliferation and terrorism? It is one thing to argue that these threats have become more pressing than the risk of a Cold War-style nuclear exchange, but quite another to explain how America's nuclear weapons can help address them.

- Third, what is the future of American extended deterrence? Who is to be offered protection under the US nuclear umbrella, against what kinds of threats? As the United States faces pressure from rising powers, there is a real temptation for it to use its nuclear forces to reassure potential new allies against new threats, possibly expanding their role in American strategic diplomacy.

- Fourth, how does America see the roles of nuclear weapons in the shifting strategic relationships between major powers, especially in Asia? Above all, what part do nuclear weapons play in America's approach to the strategic challenge posed by China's growing power?

These questions connect, of course, with deeper underlying issues about the future of America's place in the world. US policy on nuclear weapons, like its broader strategic and foreign policy, is torn between the enduring vision that America can deepen and strengthen its uncontested global leadership in a new American Century, and the growing realisation that the balance of global power is shifting towards other countries which do not share this vision. This pulls American nuclear policy in contradictory directions, on the one hand advocating abolition of nuclear weapons in a world under benign American primacy, and on the other relying more and more on its nuclear arsenal to sustain primacy as its edge in other elements of national power erodes.

These deeper questions tend to be overlooked in discussions of nuclear strategy today. There is a tendency to debate nuclear strategic questions, and to make nuclear strategic policy, as if nuclear strategy constituted a closed system of diplomatic manoeuvre in negotiations over arms control, disarmament and non-proliferation, disconnected from decisions about the development, deployment and use of

nuclear forces and the role they play in the messy world of geopolitics. This is a dangerous misunderstanding. Nuclear weapons remain today what they have always been – instruments of international policy. Every aspect of nuclear strategy – who builds weapons, what kind they build and how many, and when and how they might be used – depends on the broader strategic objectives of the governments involved. The important questions in nuclear strategy today concern the ways in which nuclear weapons connect with wider questions about the relations between states.

The underlying weakness of the NPR can be explained by its failure to connect questions about US nuclear posture to urgent and fundamental questions about America's place in the world. Americans understandably hope that their country can remain the undisputed leader of the global order despite the shifts in economic and strategic weight that are already underway. But the core questions of nuclear strategy depend on what happens if that proves impossible. Would America then concede a share of global and regional leadership to rising powers, and especially to China? Or would it resist the challenge, and compete with China in an attempt to preserve its global primacy? If that happens, nuclear forces will become central to America's strategic response. Indeed, if the strategic relationship becomes more competitive, nuclear strategic competition will become more central to it, and more dangerously unstable.

This paper will explore these issues in turn, after first briefly exploring the wider strategic and political context in which the Obama NPR was framed.

Twenty difficult years

Since the Cold War ended, successive US Administrations have sought a new rationale for US nuclear forces. This has not been easy. Nuclear weapons seem too potent not to occupy a central place in America's strategic posture. But with the Soviet Union gone, it has been hard to say clearly what America's nuclear forces are supposed to do. What future threat could compare with that posed by the Soviet Union, and therefore justify maintaining the devastating power that America built to meet the Soviet threat? Any resurgence of a Soviet-style menace – from Russia or elsewhere – would run counter to America's vision of the post-Cold War world order, in which American global leadership is uncontested. That makes it hard to argue that America needs big nuclear forces to hedge against the risk of war in the absence of such a menace.

The alternative has been to seek a rationale for America's nuclear posture in the threats posed by weak states, rogue states and non-state actors. But these weak players at the margins of the global order lack the power to pose a threat big enough to warrant the use of nuclear weapons on anything like the scale envisaged by America's Cold War nuclear posture, if at all. Nor has it been clear how nuclear weapons could realistically help to deal with these threats. What would they target?

Now it is President Barack Obama's turn to try to make sense of America's nuclear arsenal. To put it in blunt political terms, Obama's approach to nuclear strategy aims to reconcile two opposing imperatives. On the one hand he wants to consolidate his credentials as an agent of change, moving far from the positions of his

predecessor, by further cutting America's nuclear arsenal and raising the prospect that nuclear weapons might one day be abolished. On the other, he needs to avoid being criticised for undermining America's security and weakening its place in the world.

While politics is of course critical, Obama also confronts important policy opportunities and imperatives. Clearly America's nuclear forces can be cut further if the Russians are willing to do the same, reducing risk and saving money. At the same time there are serious security issues today to which nuclear weapons might provide some of the answers, and no one can assume that new strategic challenges requiring a nuclear response will not arise in future. Perhaps most fundamentally, Obama is clearly conscious of the challenge posed to America's global leadership by events at home and abroad.[3] But he shows no sign of wanting to see America relinquish global primacy. So we can assume that he will do nothing to erode whatever contribution nuclear forces might make to preserving American global primacy in future.

These objectives frame Obama's NPR, and they are clearly reflected in a series of other reports on national security released by his Administration in the first half of 2010.[4] Unfortunately the pressure of political and policy imperatives has left little room for manoeuvre. As a result, the NPR does not get far in addressing the most compelling questions about America's future nuclear posture.

Abolition and the role of nuclear weapons

The first of these questions concerns the role of nuclear weapons in US strategy. Barack Obama has most clearly signalled his determination to break with the strategic nuclear polices of his predecessors in his commitment to eventual abolition of nuclear weapons, first articulated in his April 2009 Prague speech.[5] An American agenda for abolition is only credible if Washington is willing to limit the roles of nuclear weapons in its own strategic posture. The NPR provided the first real test of whether Obama is willing to move beyond the aspirations and exhortations of his Prague speech to shift American policy in directions that make abolition more achievable. Obama has tried to downplay the implications of abolition for America's current nuclear posture by emphasising that it is a very long-term objective. But if it means anything at all, a commitment to abolition, even in the distant future, has implications for America's approach to the development and use of nuclear weapons today. In particular, it has implications for one's view of what nuclear weapons are actually for, and on this critical issue Obama's NPR failed the test.

For those who believe that nuclear weapons are only useful to deter the use of nuclear weapons by others, the basic strategic argument for abolition is straightforward: if no one has nuclear weapons, no one needs them. But for those who see nuclear weapons as having other purposes – deterring non-nuclear military action, for example – then the logic of abolition is much less convincing. If the purpose of nuclear weapons is to counterbalance the superior conventional capabilities of an adversary, then those who favour abolishing

nuclear weapons must explain how this role would be performed without them. If the answer is much larger conventional forces, the case for nuclear abolition becomes more complex and harder to sell. Partly for this reason, advocates of abolition almost always start by adopting the first, narrower view of the role of nuclear forces. This is the view, for example, robustly argued by the December 2009 report of the International Commission on Nuclear Non-Proliferation and Disarmament (ICNND), sponsored by the Australian and Japanese governments.[6] This narrower view was endorsed by President Obama himself in his Prague speech, when he said '[t]o put an end to Cold War thinking, we will reduce the role of nuclear weapons in our national security strategy, and urge others to do the same.'[7]

However, during the Cold War, America consistently and explicitly took the second, more expansive view of the role of nuclear weapons. It had compelling strategic reasons: America believed that NATO could not stop a conventional attack on Western Europe by the Warsaw Pact armies with conventional forces, and it therefore planned to use nuclear weapons against them. The Soviet Union[8] and China took the opposite view, at least publicly. They claimed their nuclear forces were only built to deter nuclear attack, and would not be used in response to a conventional attack. This position was reflected in their declaration that they would never be the first to use nuclear weapons – what became known as a No First Use declaration (NFU). The United States refused to declare an NFU policy during the Cold War. Instead, from the 1970s Washington gave what became known as a negative security assurance – that it would not use nuclear weapons against states that were neither nuclear armed nor allied with a nuclear power.

Since the threat of a Soviet-Warsaw Pact assault on Europe evaporated, the logic of America's rejection of NFU has become less compelling. America's continued refusal to declare an NFU policy clearly suggests that it continues to see uses for nuclear weapons other than to deter (or prevent) the use of nuclear forces by others.[9] The question of America's willingness to move on NFU has thus become a key indicator of its views about the uses of nuclear weapons, and hence of its commitment to nuclear abolition. President Obama's Prague speech therefore drew a lot of attention to what the NPR had to say about NFU and the broader question of the uses of US nuclear weapons. The NPR offered the first opportunity for Obama to show that he was prepared to back his bold call for nuclear abolition with specific changes to US nuclear policy and posture, either by adopting NFU, or by declaring that the sole purpose of nuclear weapons is to deter a nuclear attack by others – which is to a large extent the same thing. This was strongly urged by the ICNND.[10]

How did he go? The NPR gave the issue plenty of attention. 'Reducing the role of US nuclear weapons in US nuclear strategy' is described as one of the five key objectives of the Administration's nuclear weapons policies and posture[11] and a Chapter – 'Reducing the Role of Nuclear Weapons' – is devoted specifically to the issue.[12] This chapter acknowledged the significance of the issue, and expressed an aspiration to move towards – or 'establish conditions for' – a situation in which the United States could declare that the sole use of

its nuclear weapons is to deter nuclear attack on itself or its allies.[13] But it did not move to that point, nor did it foreshadow any willingness to adopt an NFU posture in the absence of major, and unspecified, changes in the strategic environment.

Instead, the report claimed significant progress towards reducing the role of nuclear weapons for purposes other than deterring nuclear attack. It said that 'since the end of the Cold War, the strategic situation has changed in fundamental ways'.[14] With the disappearance of the Soviet threat, and the conventional military capabilities and missile defences now available:

> *…the role of U.S. nuclear weapons to deter and respond to non-nuclear attacks – conventional, biological, or chemical – has declined significantly. The United States will continue to reduce the role of nuclear weapons in deterring non-nuclear attack.*[15]

Thanks to these developments, the NPR said, the United States is prepared to strengthen and extend its previous Negative Security Assurances (NSAs), by declaring that:

> *…the United States will not use or threaten to use nuclear weapons against non-nuclear weapons states that are party to the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty (NPT) and in compliance with their nuclear non-proliferation obligations.*[16]

This would apply even if such states used or threatened the use of chemical or biological weapons.

How far does this go towards fulfilling Obama's commitment to reduce the role of nuclear weapons in America's national security? The answer seems to be, not very. First, of course, it does nothing to reduce the role of nuclear weapons in US strategy towards states not covered by this form of words. Indeed, the NPR quite explicitly rules out any reduction in the uses America envisages for nuclear weapons in conflicts with nuclear-armed states, or states not in compliance with their non-proliferation obligations. It says:

> *…there remains a narrow range of contingencies in which U.S. nuclear weapons may still play a role in deterring a conventional or CBW attack against the United States or its allies and partners.*[17]

The NPR does not define or describe that 'narrow range' of contingencies in any way, other than to say that America's 'willingness to use nuclear weapons against countries not covered by the new assurance' has not in any way increased.[18] In the political and policy context of the NPR, this suggests that nor has it shrunk.

The clear implication of all this is that the new NPR envisages no reduction in the role of nuclear weapons in conflicts with states that possess or are deemed to be seeking nuclear weapons. This implication is not in any way counteracted by the assurance in the next sentence 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.'[19] This tells us next to nothing, as it has been many decades since serious strategists imagined that nuclear weapons might be used in anything

other than 'extreme circumstances', Bush-era speculation about the usability of proposed 'bunker-buster' nukes notwithstanding.

Moreover, the recurrent use of the phrase 'allies and partners' does make it clear that the United States remains willing to use nuclear weapons not just to protect itself against some forms of non-nuclear attack, but also other countries – including potentially some that are not formal allies. This widens the range of possible 'extreme circumstances' significantly. (The question of protection of allies and partners through extended nuclear deterrence is examined further below.)

But what does the 'strengthened' NSA mean for the role of nuclear weapons in US strategy towards states which *are* covered by the new formulation: non-nuclear weapon state NPT members that are compliant with their nuclear non-proliferation obligations, yet somehow willing and able to threaten the United States or its allies with chemical, biological or massive conventional attack? The number of current candidates for such states would seem very small indeed. Presumably they would potentially include Iran or North Korea, were those countries verifiably to reject their nuclear weapons efforts and return fully to the NPT fold.

It is hard to imagine that previous US nuclear policy would have genuinely envisaged the use of nuclear weapons against any state that fell within these criteria. The only exception is the possibility that the United States might want the option to use or threaten the use of nuclear weapons against the use of chemical or biological weapons by such a state. The principal import of the new NSA is to forgo the option of using nuclear weapons in these circumstances that previous Administrations had preserved. This is a tangible step, intended to encourage nuclear non-proliferation, but its strategic significance is slight. Despite claims that an implicit US nuclear threat discouraged the use of chemical weapons by Iraq against Israel in 1991, the credibility of using nuclear weapons in response to a chemical attack is generally considered to be low, since chemical weapons are inherently much less lethal than nuclear weapons. The same is true of biological weapons today, but the possibility that they may become more lethal in future is covered by a specific let-out clause in the new NPR:

> *…the United States reserves the right to make any adjustment in the assurance that may be warranted by the evolution and proliferation of the biological weapons threat and U.S. capacities to counter that threat.*[20]

It is hard to escape the conclusion that the NPR, despite the 'strengthened' NSA, does not substantially change America's concept of the role of nuclear forces in its overall national security strategy. If this is indeed so, Obama has failed the first test of his willingness to pursue the visionary agenda he set out in Prague.

Finally, the NPR repeatedly emphasises that the prospect of reduced reliance on nuclear weapons in America's strategic posture depends directly on the increasing capacity of conventional weapons to handle conventional threats. For example, it says that the United States will consider reducing the role of nuclear weapons in responding to non-nuclear attack

because, since the end of the Cold War, 'conventional military capabilities now provide a wide range of effective conventional response options to deter and if necessary defeat conventional threats from regional actors.'[21]

Moreover, the NPR commits the United States to increase its conventional capabilities relative to potential adversaries so as to allow tighter limits on the roles expected of nuclear weapons. For example, the NPR says that the United States will:

> *…continue to strengthen conventional capabilities and reduce the role of nuclear weapons in deterring non-nuclear attacks, with the objective of making deterrence of nuclear attack on the United States or our allies and partners the sole purpose of U.S. nuclear weapons.*[22]

But the NPR's optimistic view of America's present and future edge in conventional capabilities is at odds with more pessimistic views expressed, for example, by Defense Secretary Gates in a recent speech on US naval power:

> *At the higher end of the access-denial spectrum, the virtual monopoly the U.S. has enjoyed with precision guided weapons is eroding – especially with long-range, accurate anti-ship cruise and ballistic missiles that can potentially strike from over the horizon… The U.S. will also face increasingly sophisticated underwater combat systems – including numbers of stealthy subs – all of which could end the operational sanctuary our Navy has enjoyed in the Western Pacific for the better part of six decades.*[23]

It is far from clear that the United States will be in a fiscal position to fund the kind of continued expansion of conventional military capabilities which the NPR suggests are required to reduce dependence on nuclear weapons. Indeed, the opposite is likely to be the case: as the conventional capabilities of potential adversaries increase, and the US defence budget stagnates or even shrinks, Washington will be tempted to rely more and more on nuclear weapons to address shortfalls in conventional capabilities.

Nuclear proliferation and nuclear terrorism

The new NPR places great emphasis on the threats of nuclear proliferation and nuclear terrorism – two very different issues which are bracketed together more for political impact and presentation than to convey any coherent policy argument. Defense Secretary Robert Gates' Foreword says 'This NPR places the prevention of nuclear terrorism and proliferation at the top of the US policy agenda,'[24] and the same point is repeated elsewhere. The Executive Summary describes nuclear terrorism as 'today's most immediate and extreme danger'.[25]

Moreover, the NPR asserts in several places that this priority will influence the posture of US nuclear forces:

> *The massive nuclear arsenal we inherited from the Cold War era of bipolar military confrontation is poorly suited to address the challenges posed by suicidal terrorists and unfriendly regimes seeking nuclear weapons. Therefore, it is essential that we better align our nuclear policies and posture to our most*

> *urgent priorities – preventing nuclear terrorism and nuclear proliferation.*[26]

This aspiration is linked to the claim that the United States will reduce reliance on nuclear weapons for other tasks:

> *But fundamental changes in the international security environment in recent years – including the growth of unrivaled U.S. conventional military capabilities, major improvements in missile defenses, and the easing of Cold War rivalries – enable us to fulfill those objectives at significantly lower nuclear force levels and with reduced reliance on nuclear weapons. Therefore, without jeopardizing our traditional deterrence and reassurance goals, we are now able to shape our nuclear weapons policies and force structure in ways that will better enable us to meet today's most pressing security challenges.*[27]

Brave words, but the NPR does not explain how America's arsenal is or could be reshaped to address these highest-priority threats. The chapter devoted to them is silent on how America's nuclear forces can contribute to this priority. It focuses solely on diplomatic measures to strengthen the non-proliferation regime, improve the security of nuclear material and set a good example through its own arms control activities, including negotiation of the new START treaty with Russia and ratification of the Comprehensive Nuclear Test Ban Treaty (CTBT). These are all important and worthwhile policies, but they are hardly new, and their limits are well known. The NPR gives no reason to believe that they will allow the United States to be more successful in addressing the problems of nuclear proliferation and terrorism than it has been in the past. In particular, while the NPR says that America seeks to bolster the non-proliferation regime by 'reversing the nuclear ambitions of North Korea and Iran'[28] it offers no new ideas as to how to do this. That is an important omission, because after a decade of failure there is good cause to doubt whether, without some new policy ideas, the United States can halt, let alone reverse, the Iranian and North Korean nuclear programs.

There seems then to be a curious disconnect in the NPR on the issues of non-proliferation and nuclear terrorism, and American nuclear posture. Nuclear proliferation and terrorism are identified throughout the document as the highest-priority threats to America, and therefore as the key focus of its nuclear posture. But it says nothing specific about how nuclear forces could be used to address either of them. The key problem with using nuclear weapons to address nuclear terrorism is of course that non-state adversaries are impossible to deter, having no state that can be held at risk. Moreover, they are unlikely to have the kinds of facilities that would require a nuclear weapon to destroy. The closest the new NPR comes to suggesting how America's nuclear forces might nonetheless help prevent nuclear terrorism comes when it says the United States will:

> *[Renew] the U.S. commitment to hold fully accountable any state, terrorist group, or other non-state actor that supports or enables terrorist efforts to obtain or use weapons of mass destruction, whether by facilitating, financing, or providing expertise or safe haven for such efforts.*[29]

This could be taken to imply a threat of nuclear retaliation against a state that helps terrorists acquire nuclear weapons, although this would run counter to the Obama Administration's declared aspiration to reduce reliance on nuclear arms. Whether such a threat is credible and sensible is an interesting question. Either way there is no reason to think that it would call for any capabilities that are not already abundantly available in America's existing nuclear forces. So it is hard to see any substance in the NPR's claim to reshape America's forces to meet the threat of nuclear terrorism.

Equally, it is hard to see how nuclear weapons could help prevent nuclear proliferation. The new NPR makes no effort to revive the Bush Administration's discredited ideas about using nuclear bunker-busters to attack rogue states' nuclear programs. Nonetheless, by excluding nuclear proliferators from its 'strengthened' NSA declaration, the Obama Administration is clearly indicating that it does see some role for nuclear weapons in preventing the development of nuclear weapons by others. It just doesn't say what that role is. Clearly, American nuclear forces would have a role in deterring a country that has developed nuclear weapons from using them, or even in preventing their imminent use by pre-emptive strike. But to keep this option open it is not necessary to exclude from the NSA those who are trying to acquire nuclear weapons – only those who have already developed nuclear forces. Nor does it require the development of any new kinds of nuclear forces.

Reassuring allies and partners

The new NPR places a high priority on the role of American nuclear weapons in defending US allies and partners. 'Strengthening regional deterrence and reassuring US allies and partners' is one of the five key objectives of America's nuclear weapons policy and posture spelt out in the NPR.[30] Even more strikingly, the Introduction describes it as one of the two purposes that President Obama has given for maintaining US nuclear forces, the other being to 'deter potential adversaries'.[31] Much of the discussion of this issue in the chapter of the NPR devoted to it[32] addresses the debates about the future of tactical nuclear weapons in Europe, which is coming to a head in the context of the preparation of a new NATO Strategic Concept in late 2010. The United States clearly wishes to keep at least a few tactical nuclear weapons in Europe, and is keen to encourage its European allies to agree to this. Other parts of the chapter are clearly intended to reassure US allies in Asia and the Middle East, where America does not permanently deploy tactical nuclear weapons, that the US can provide a reliable extended deterrent without basing nuclear forces locally. The NPR fails, however, to explain who is to be protected by US extended deterrence, against what, what part nuclear weapons will or should play in American efforts to defend allies, and what this means for US nuclear forces.

There is no doubt that America's extended deterrence posture plays an important role in global stability, not least because it reduces the incentive for US allies and partners to develop their own nuclear forces. But big questions remain about the nature and extent of US extended deterrence commitments in the post-

Cold War world, and the NPR does little to resolve them. Take the question of who is covered. The phrase 'allies and partners' recurs throughout the document and is nowhere more specifically defined. This seems to imply an expansive concept of extended deterrence – that the US is willing and able to use its nuclear forces to support the security of a large number of states around the world. Clearly, it includes America's formal treaty allies under NATO and the San Francisco System treaties in Asia. We may presume it includes Israel and Taiwan, with whom the US has no formal treaty obligations, but to whom it has clear and long-standing commitments. But what of others? Presumably it is also intended to cover states in the Middle East that may feel threatened by Iran's nuclear program. It might make good sense for the US to guarantee the security of regional states against threats or aggression from a nuclear-armed neighbour.

But if that is the US intention, one would think that the NPR would say so explicitly. The NPR would be a perfect place to articulate either a general doctrine that the United States would provide extended nuclear deterrence to any non-nuclear-armed country threatened by a nuclear-armed neighbour, or (for example if the implications of such a general statement for Israel proved uncomfortable) to provide a list of countries to which US extended deterrence would be provided. It seems very odd to make so much of the importance of the reassurance provided by extended nuclear deterrence, and yet leave it unclear who exactly is to be reassured. Moreover, the use of 'partners and allies' on what appears to be an equal footing raises the question of whether the value of an alliance relationship with the United States is being cheapened. If allies, who may have binding and perhaps reciprocal security commitments, are to receive the same protection as partners who do not, why be an ally when one can have the benefits without the costs?

The NPR also leaves unanswered some deep questions about the circumstances in which the United States would threaten or use nuclear weapons to defend the interests or territory of 'allies and partners'. For quite understandable reasons it promotes the idea of increasing dependence on non-nuclear forces to deter attacks on US allies and partners,[33] but it also clearly envisages the use of nuclear weapons to respond to non-nuclear attacks by nuclear-capable powers on allies and partners.[34] This is of course entirely consistent with the Obama Administration's reluctance, already noted, to move to a NFU policy. But it does underline the extent to which, for all the talk of moving beyond Cold War paradigms, the Obama Administration maintains the posture that was adopted to contain the Soviet Union. It clearly remains willing, as it was during the Cold War, to use nuclear weapons to respond to conventional attacks on its allies and partners. But compared with the Cold War, today the number of potential adversaries against which extended nuclear deterrence is provided is growing, and the number of allies and partners to which nuclear-backed guarantees are apparently given has grown too, while the stake that the United States has in their security has shrunk.

During the Cold War, US extended nuclear deterrence was focused overwhelmingly on the Soviet Union, with China arguably a distant, second-order concern for a short time between the mid 1960s and the early 1970s. Today

Russia remains a major potential threat, China has become equally or even more significant, North Korea has been added, and Iran will almost certainly follow. Moreover, while none are mentioned in the NPR, there must be a possibility that one or the other could pose a threat to non-nuclear-armed neighbours in future. And if, as the NPR suggests, nuclear proliferation is approaching a 'tipping point', there are likely to be more nuclear-armed states in the relatively near future.[35] That suggests that the burden of extended nuclear deterrence is also likely to grow.

The number of states being protected seems to be growing too. During the Cold War the US defined quite precisely the states to which its nuclear umbrella was extended. The Western alliance was a fairly clearly defined group, with NATO members in Europe and San Francisco System allies in Asia at its core. Now, as we have seen, under the rubric of 'allies and partners' the number of potential beneficiaries seems to have grown.

The implications of these observation seem to be that, while the NPR talks of limiting extended nuclear deterrence, in fact it seems to have expanded it. This carries several risks. One question is whether implicitly extending the range of countries covered by extended deterrence weakens its credibility in the eyes of really important allies like Japan. Another even more important question is whether the costs to America of expanding extended deterrence have been fully understood. It costs Washington relatively little to extend nuclear deterrence by threatening a nuclear attack on a country that lacks the capacity for nuclear retaliation against the United States itself. But using nuclear threats to try to deter a country that could retaliate with nuclear forces directly against America is a very different proposition, carrying immense potential costs for America itself. The critical question therefore arises whether the interests the US has in protecting allies with extended nuclear deterrence is worth these costs.

During the Cold War, America's willingness to extend nuclear deterrence to allies in Europe and Asia was based very directly on its perceived vital interest in preventing Soviet domination of the Eurasian continent, which in turn reflected a strong conviction that if the Soviet Union controlled Europe or Asia it would be able to dominate the world, including the United States. Today US interests in the security of allies and partners is less clear. A reading of the new US *National Security Strategy*, published a few weeks after the NPR,[36] suggests that the allegiance of allies and partners is essential for US global leadership, and US global leadership is essential for world order, or at least for a world order in which America can prosper and flourish.

We will come back to the implications of this vision of America's place in the world in the concluding section of this paper, but here we simply need to note how different the US interests being served by extended nuclear deterrence today are from those that it supported during the Cold War. This difference raises important questions about the wisdom of expanding extended deterrence. It was one thing to accept the high risk of nuclear attack on American cities as the price for defending West Germany from the Soviets. It would be quite another to run the same risk to protect Estonia from Russian aggression: does America's own security depend on keeping

Estonia out of Moscow's hands? Likewise, American willingness to extend nuclear deterrence to protect American allies and partners in East Asia from Chinese nuclear threats or attacks presupposes that, for example, protecting Taiwan's current status is worth the risk of devastating nuclear attacks on several major US cities. It is not clear that these judgments have been carefully considered in reaching the expansive view of Extended Deterrence suggested in the NPR.

If the NPR does indeed signal an expansion of extended nuclear deterrence, two important questions arise. What does this mean for the credibility of such extensive extended deterrence? Will this growing umbrella discourage proliferators, or prompt them to redouble their efforts to acquire nuclear insurance of their own?

Russia and China

The NPR gives, understandably, significant attention to what it calls 'reinforcing strategic stability with Russia and China.'[37] They are bracketed together in the NPR, as they are in the Ballistic Missile Defense Review (BMDR) Report published in February 2010.[38] The reason for this is plain – as the BMDR said, '[t]oday, only Russia and China have the capability to conduct a large-scale ballistic missile attack on the territory of the United States'.[39] However, they are treated very differently. Russia is acknowledged as a nuclear peer of the US, and as a country with which, not withstanding differences, a broadly cooperative relationship is to be expected in the future.[40] China is treated more circumspectly: while converging interests are noted, so too are concerns about China's military capabilities, including nuclear capabilities, which the NPR says 'raise questions about China's future strategic intentions'.[41] One might say that both in the nuclear field, and more generally, the US relationship with Russia is shaped by the hope of future partnership, while the relationship with China is shaped primarily by the expectation of future competition.

Future nuclear strategic relationships with China and Russia are discussed in the chapter of the NPR dealing with nuclear force levels,[42] which tends to confirm that US decisions on future nuclear capabilities are in fact being driven by the need to 'maintain strategic deterrence and stability' in these relationships, rather than by concerns about proliferation or terrorism. The NPR says that 'maintaining strategic stability with the two countries will be an important challenge in the years ahead.'[43] Its key response to that challenge is separate, high-level bilateral dialogues with Moscow and Beijing. There are telling and important differences in the ways the NPR describes the US approaches to these exchanges. It says that dialogue with Moscow will allow Washington to reassure the Russians that American missile defence and other force developments are not intended to affect the strategic balance with Russia.[44] But although the NPR says that China shares Russia's concerns about US missile defence and other programs,[45] it does not offer the same reassurance to Beijing.

Anecdotes from inside the Beltway suggest that disagreements over how to treat China were among the most contentious issues in the development of the NPR. This appears to be confirmed by the scant treatment of China in the final document. The NPR is silent on the

most important question in the US-China strategic-nuclear relationship, and arguably the most important strategic-nuclear question facing the United States today: does the US accept China as a nuclear peer, not in the sense of having similar-sized forces, but in the more important sense of having a balance of mutual nuclear deterrence between them which reassures each of them against nuclear threats from the other?

The stronger China grows, and the more capable it becomes of raising the costs and risks of US conventional military operations in the Western Pacific, the more critical this question becomes. As we have seen, the NPR reaffirms America's long-standing determination to hold open the option of using nuclear weapons to respond to conventional military attacks on America or its 'allies and partners' which it cannot defeat at acceptable levels of cost and risk with its own conventional forces. It is clear that America believes China's conventional military developments are moving the balance of cost and risk in China's favour,[46] and that this trend is likely to continue. The question inevitably arises; to what extent will the United States seek to use nuclear threats to neutralise China's growing conventional capabilities? That depends in turn on the confidence the United States can have that it could neutralise China's modest capacity to retaliate against the US homeland, or its more substantial capacity to retaliate against targets of high value to the United States on the Western side of the Pacific.

The management of its strategic-nuclear relationship with Beijing thus presents Washington with an acute dilemma in the context of the shift in the conventional military balance between them in the Western Pacific. China's growing sea-denial capabilities limit US military options in the Western Pacific. If America accepts China as a nuclear 'peer' – a country with whom it has a relationship of mutual nuclear deterrence – then there can be no question of America's using its superiority in nuclear forces to offset its declining advantage in conventional forces. That means that as China's conventional forces continue to grow, the military basis of US strategic primacy in Asia may simply fade away. On the other hand, if the US does not accept China as a nuclear peer, and attempts instead to deny China a mutual deterrence relationship by building forces to prevent Chinese nuclear retaliatory strikes on the US, it invites China to respond by expanding its own nuclear forces, thus creating a nuclear arms race between them. The United States might not be able to win this kind of arms race, because the odds are stacked China's way. It is much easier for China to increase its capacity to hit US cities than for the United States to increase its capacity to destroy Chinese missiles.

American policy-makers have not found a way to resolve this dilemma; instead they have tended to evade it. The NPR emphasises America's commitment to maintain strategic stability in the US-China relationship,[47] but does not describe the basis or nature of that relationship. Likewise, the BMDR, in attempting to reassure Russia and China about the purposes of US missile defence systems, says

> *While the GMD system would be employed to defend the United States against limited missile launches from any source, it does not have the capacity to cope with large scale Russian or Chinese missile attacks,*

> *and is not intended to affect the strategic balance with those countries.*[48]

This language might seem reassuring to China, but its significance depends on how America sees the *present* strategic balance with China, and on the slippery import of that word 'intended'.

The NPR and its companion reviews therefore fail to address perhaps the most important strategic nuclear policy question facing the United States at present. By doing so it risks perpetuating a potentially dangerous impression in China that the United States may in fact intend to build a nuclear posture that can neutralise China's minimum deterrent and therefore offset America's declining advantages in the conventional military balance with Beijing.[49]

American power and nuclear weapons

The nuclear strategic policies articulated in the NPR embody and perpetuate the view which has done so much to influence US strategic policy since 9/11, that the biggest challenges to America's security and its place in the world come from rogue states and non-state actors, rather than from the growing strategic ambitions and capacities of other great powers. There are signs elsewhere – in the Quadrennial Defense Review, for example[50] – that the Obama Administration is starting to move away from this perception, and to understand that China's growing power, in particular, poses a deep challenge to American primacy in Asia, and therefore to its global position, of a much more fundamental kind than the threats posed by al-Qaeda, North Korea or even Iran. But nowhere has the Obama Administration shown evidence that it has reflected deeply on how America should respond to this challenge, and in places – like the NPR – it seems to try to ignore that it is happening at all.

Which path America takes will have profound implications for its nuclear policies. President Obama's vision of a world free of nuclear weapons seems to be based on the expectation of a global order in which US primacy is unchallenged. In that world the abandonment of nuclear weapons would cost America little. This might be what the NPR means when it says that the United States will work to establish conditions under which a policy of 'sole use' could be safely adopted.[51] It may simply be saying that the US would be willing to limit the use of nuclear weapons to deterring a nuclear attack by others if and when American conventional military superiority was so unchallenged that it would not need to use nuclear forces to meet any conventional threat. That is a big 'if'.

On the other hand, if America does find that it faces a sustained challenge to its primacy from China, nuclear forces will become central to America's strategic response. We can expect that as the strategic relationship becomes more competitive, nuclear strategic competition will become more and more central to the relationship, especially as US conventional military advantages fade. This parallels what happened between the Soviets and the United States in the Cold War, although it would play out in different ways between America and China because the strategic circumstances would be so different. Nonetheless, if intensifying strategic competition with China cannot be avoided, it will increasingly dominate

US nuclear policy, as Washington seeks a combination of offensive and defensive forces that can best neutralise China's capacity for nuclear attacks on the United States, and China seeks at least to preserve that capacity to attack the United States. The resulting nuclear 'balance' could be highly unstable.

Finally, if America accepts a degree of accommodation with China's growing power, and with the power of other emerging giants, then a gradual retreat to an elevated form of minimum deterrence would be possible, and highly desirable, provided other great powers were prepared to limit their strategic ambitions too. Building and sustaining that kind of international order would require remarkable statesmanship from many leaders in many lands, so it can hardly be regarded as a likely outcome.

These observations suggest that there are a number of really momentous decisions for America to make about the future of its nuclear posture, but they have not been effectively addressed in the new NPR. The reason is simple. It is hard for Washington to develop coherent policies about the role of nuclear weapons in America's wider strategic posture, because the nature of America's wider strategic posture itself, and indeed of its international role, is unresolved. The NPR does not articulate a coherent US nuclear strategy because, stranded between the dream of global leadership and the reality of declining relative power, America today lacks a coherent idea of the international role that its nuclear forces are intended to support.

NOTES

[1] NPR.

[2] This paper has benefitted greatly from comments by Rory Medcalf and Fiona Cunningham from the Lowy Institute. My thanks to both.

[3] See for example his remarkable speech on Afghanistan at West Point, 1 December 2009 http://www.whitehouse.gov/the-press-office/remarks-president-address-nation-way-forward-afghanistan-and-pakistan.

[4] BMDR, NSS, QDR.

[5] Prague speech: http://www.whitehouse.gov/the_press_office/Remarks-By-President-Barack-Obama-In-Prague-As-Delivered/ .

[6] ICNND report p 59ff.

[7] Prague Speech.

[8] After the Cold War and the fall of the Soviet Union, Russia repudiated NFU in the early 1990s.

[9] The issue is complicated by the question of nuclear preemptive strike against nuclear forces being readied for imminent attack. It could be argued that a minimum conception of the role of nuclear weapons could include not just deterrence of nuclear attack but preemption of such an attack under some circumstances. This would obviously require 'first use' of nuclear weapons, and thus would be ruled out by a NFU stance, but it would arguably be consistent with a minimal view of the role of nuclear weapons being intended solely to deter or prevent nuclear attack.

[10] ICNND report Recommendation 52, p 177.

[11] NPR p 2.

[12] NPR pp 15-18.

[13] NPR p 17.

[14] NPR p 15.

[15] NPR p 15.

[16] NPR p 15.

[17] NPR p 16.

[18] NPR p 16.

[19] NPR p 16.
[20] NPR p 16.
[21] NPR p 15.
[22] NPR p 17.
[23] Secretary Gates speech to a naval audience in March 2010: http://www.defense.gov/speeches/speech.aspx?speechid=1460.
[24] NPR p i.
[25] NPR p iv. This is either careless wording or strange strategic analysis. It is easy to agree that nuclear terrorism is the most immediate major threat that America faces – one might say the most immediate threat of extreme harm. But it is not the most extreme – that surely would be the threat of a full-scale nuclear exchange with Russia, which would be incomparably worse that the handful of nuclear weapons that a terrorist organisation might at most be able to deploy.
[26] NPR p v.
[27] NPR p 6.
[28] NPR p 9.
[29] NPR p 12.
[30] NPR p 2.
[31] NPR p iii.
[32] NPR pp 31-35.
[33] NPR p 33.
[34] NPR p 31.
[35] NPR p v1, 9.
[36] NSS: http://www.whitehouse.gov/sites/default/files/rss_viewer/national_security_strategy.pdf.
[37] NPR p 28.
[38] BMDR: http://www.defense.gov/bmdr/docs/BMDR%20as%20of%2026JAN10%200630_for%20web.pdf
[39] BMDR p 4.
[40] NPR p 4.
[41] NPR p 5.
[42] NPR pp 28-30.
[43] NPR p 28.
[44] NPR p 28-9.
[45] NPR p 28.
[46] See for example Secretary Gates speech to a naval audience in March 2010: http://www.defense.gov/speeches/speech.aspx?speechid=1460.
[47] NPR p 29.
[48] BMDR p 13.
[49] For a fuller treatment of these issues, see Hugh White *Stopping a nuclear arms race between America and China,* Lowy Institute, Sydney 2007. http://www.lowyinstitute.org/Publication.asp?pid=654.
[50]QDR p iii.
[51] See p XX above.

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