

IS THE 2018 NUCLEAR POSTURE REVIEW AS BAD AS THE CRITICS CLAIM IT IS?

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APRIL 2018

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

In February 2018, the Trump administration released the Nuclear Posture Review (NPR), which seeks to ensure that the United States will continue to maintain a safe, secure, and effective deterrent that protects the U.S. homeland, assures allies, and above all, deters adversaries. The review largely achieves these goals. However, it's uncertain whether or not the administration can use the document to build a sustainable bipartisan consensus on nuclear policy. The president's controversial public statements and the hefty price tag of the strategic nuclear modernization program represent key challenges to fostering and maintaining that consensus.

The administration's chances of sustaining a consensus may improve if it is able to calibrate its public messages on nuclear weapons; effectively engage Congress, the general public, and allies on the importance of nuclear deterrence; advance pragmatic arms control and non-proliferation initiatives; enhance strategic stability with potential adversaries such as Russia and China; and put in place effective oversight mechanisms to address cost concerns associated with the strategic nuclear modernization program.

INTRODUCTION

"Nuclear Posture Review signals new arms race."¹

"An arms race toward global instability."²

"The time is 2 minutes to nuclear midnight."³

Reading these headlines about the recently released Nuclear Posture Review (NPR), you would think that the document is a dramatic break from

long-standing U.S. nuclear policy and strategy. As former U.S. Senator Ernest Hollings (D-SC) once said, it's like "chicken lickin', the sky is falling."⁴ Is the sky really falling? Is the NPR as bad as critics claim? Is the review leading the United States and the world toward a new arms race?

On the contrary, I would argue that the 2018 NPR is fundamentally consistent with long-standing U.S. nuclear policy and strategy, including the Obama

1 Katrina vanden Heuvel, "The Nuclear Posture Review Signals a New Arms Race," *The Nation*, February 13, 2018, <https://www.thenation.com/article/the-nuclear-posture-review-signals-a-new-arms-race/>.

2 Omar Lamari, "An Arms Race Toward Global Instability," *Forbes*, February 20, 2018, <https://www.forbes.com/sites/stratfor/2018/02/20/an-arms-race-toward-global-instability/#73241cb25b62>.

3 Tony Magliano, "The time is 2 minutes to nuclear midnight," *Angelus*, March 2, 2018, <https://angelusnews.com/content/the-time-is-2-minutes-to-nuclear-midnight>.

4 "Did you hear: 38 classic 'Hollings-isms,'" *The Times and Democrat*, December 16, 2004, http://thetandd.com/news/did-you-hear-classic-hollings-isms/article_8327afa8-b598-5930-aeb0-3a09e6d688e4.html.

administration's 2010 NPR. However, the authors of the 2018 NPR face significant challenges as they seek to move forward with implementation of the review. This paper will discuss some of the key issues in the NPR, note the long-term implementation challenges the review faces, and propose practical recommendations for how the Trump administration might mitigate these challenges.

ASSESSMENT OF THE NPR

The security environment

The NPR's assessment of the current security environment is compelling. It states that "global threat conditions have worsened markedly since the most recent 2010 NPR. ... The United States faces a more diverse and advanced nuclear-threat environment than ever before."⁵ In particular, the NPR highlights the return of great power competition, especially as it pertains to U.S. relationships with Russia and China. As my colleague Thomas Wright notes in his recent book, *All Measures Short of War: The Contest for the 21st Century and the Future of American Power*, "The United States is in competition with Russia and China for the future of the international order."⁶ By the end of the Obama administration, many senior officials, including myself, had come to a similar conclusion.⁷

In April 2009, President Obama delivered his seminal speech in Prague outlining his long-term vision for a "world free of nuclear weapons."⁸ In actuality, the Prague speech was a nuanced document that carefully balanced deterrence, arms control, and non-proliferation priorities. While the speech laid out the president's long-term

vision, Obama also noted that this was unlikely to happen during his lifetime, and that as long as nuclear weapons existed, the United States would maintain a safe, secure, and effective deterrent.⁹ The speech was intended to serve as a catalyst to encourage further action on arms reduction and non-proliferation by other nations.

Unfortunately, that did not turn out to be the case. As the 2018 NPR notes:

Despite concerted U.S. efforts to reduce the role of nuclear weapons in international affairs and to negotiate reductions in the number of nuclear weapons, since 2010 no potential adversary has reduced either the role of nuclear weapons in its national security strategy or number of nuclear weapons in the field. Rather, they moved decidedly in the opposite direction.¹⁰

While the Obama administration made modest progress with Russia on nuclear reductions early in the administration, Russian security elites never bought into Obama's long-term vision. For example, Russia signed the New Strategic Arms Reduction Treaty (New START) in 2010 not because it believed in a "world free of nuclear weapons." Rather, New START was fundamentally about maintaining strategic nuclear parity with the United States, capping the number of U.S. nuclear forces, and providing Russia insights into the U.S. strategic nuclear arsenal that it might not have access to without the treaty. Furthermore, Russia has shown little interest in pursuing additional nuclear reductions, especially with regard to non-strategic nuclear weapons, which are not limited by New START, and in which Russia has a large numerical advantage.

5 U.S. Department of Defense, "Nuclear Posture Review 2018," (Arlington, VA: U.S. Department of Defense, February 2018), p. V, <https://media.defense.gov/2018/Feb/02/2001872886/-1/-1/1/2018-NUCLEAR-POSTURE-REVIEW-FINAL-REPORT.PDF>.

6 Thomas Wright, *All Measures Short of War: The Contest for the 21st Century and the Future of American Power*, (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2017), 189.

7 "U.S. accuses Russia of dismantling security agreements," *The Financial Times*, March 30, 2016, <https://www.ft.com/content/943a8ae0-f62e-11e5-803c-d27c7117d132>.

8 Barack Obama, "Remarks by President Barack Obama in Prague as Delivered," (speech, Prague, Czech Republic, April 5, 2009), <https://obamawhitehouse.archives.gov/the-press-office/remarks-president-barack-obama-prague-delivered>.

9 Ibid.

10 U.S. Department of Defense, "Nuclear Posture Review 2018," 7.

Continuing the Obama strategic nuclear modernization program

Far from being a dramatic departure from previous nuclear policy and strategy, the 2018 NPR essentially ratifies the Obama administration's strategic nuclear modernization program. Specifically, the NPR recommends moving forward with the Obama administration's strategic modernization program: the Columbia-class ballistic missile submarine (SSBN), the Ground-Based Strategic Deterrent (GBSD), the B-21 bomber, and the Long-Range Stand-Off (LRSO) cruise missile. Though some experts, primarily in the arms control and disarmament community, opposed elements of the Obama modernization program, the program was key to winning Senate advice and consent for New START, and it continues to maintain strong bipartisan support in Congress. These systems enhance strategic stability and are consistent with U.S. arms control obligations and commitments.

Arms control and non-proliferation

Many analysts, including myself, were concerned with some of the Trump administration's initial statements regarding arms control and non-proliferation, especially claims that New START was a "bad deal for the United States."¹¹ Luckily, those concerns have not yet come to pass, and the language on arms control and non-proliferation is largely consistent with the approach taken by previous U.S. administrations. Admittedly, the 2018 NPR does not focus the same level of attention and emphasis on arms control and non-proliferation as

the Obama administration's 2010 NPR. However, under the 2018 review, the U.S. will maintain our negative security assurance not to use, or threaten to use, nuclear weapons against a non-nuclear weapons state in compliance with its nuclear non-proliferation obligations;¹² continue to fund the Comprehensive Test Ban Treaty Organization, the International Monitoring System, and the International Data Center;¹³ remain a party to New START; and continue active participation in the International Partnership for Nuclear Disarmament Verification (IPNDV).¹⁴

Some analysts have criticized the NPR for treating arms control and non-proliferation as an "afterthought." This line of criticism is not entirely fair. Despite its best efforts, the Obama administration was unable to make any further progress on arms reductions during its second term in office. Moreover, it is unlikely that any new U.S. administration—Democrat or Republican—would have been in a position to make significant progress on arms control given the current security environment, and Russia's violation of several arms control agreements.¹⁵ Indeed, a strong argument can be made that the bilateral U.S.-Russia arms reductions process that began in the late 1980s may be at an end, making it imperative to anticipate what a future U.S.-Russia strategic stability framework might look like in the absence of further negotiated reductions.

11 Jonathan Landay and David Rhode, "In call with Putin, Trump denounced Obama-era arms Treaty," *Reuters*, February 9, 2017, <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-usa-trump-putin/exclusive-in-call-with-putin-trump-denounced-obama-era-nuclear-arms-treaty-sources-idUSKBN1502A5>.

12 The 2018 NPR caveats this assurance by noting that given the potential of significant non-nuclear strategic attacks, the United States reserves the right to make adjustments to the assurance that may be warranted by the evolution of the threat. The 2010 NPR made a similar caveat with regard to biological weapons, which states: "Given the catastrophic potential of biological weapons and the rapid pace of bio-technology development, 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." See U.S. Department of Defense, "Nuclear Posture Review," (Arlington, VA: U.S. Department of Defense, February 2010), 14, https://www.defense.gov/Portals/1/features/defenseReviews/NPR/2010_Nuclear_Posture_Review_Report.pdf.

13 However, the NPR makes clear that "the United States will not seek Senate ratification of the Comprehensive Nuclear Test Ban Treaty." That said, the U.S. Senate does not ratify treaties, it provides its "advice and consent" to ratification. It is the president who officially ratifies treaties on behalf of the United States.

14 U.S. Department of Defense, "Nuclear Posture Review 2018," 71-74.

15 The United States judges Russia to be in violation of the Intermediate-Range Nuclear Forces Treaty and the Conventional Forces in Europe Treaty. See "Adherence to and Compliance with Arms Control, Nonproliferation, and Disarmament Agreements and Commitments," U.S. Department of State, April 14, 2017, <https://www.state.gov/t/avc/rls/rpt/2017/270330.htm>.

Critics of the NPR also argue that the document fails to explicitly reference Article VI of the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty (NPT), which calls on signatories “to pursue negotiations in good faith on effective measures relating to cessation of the nuclear arms race at an early date and to nuclear disarmament.”¹⁶ While this is true, the NPR does reference the NPT, stating: “The United States remains committed to nuclear non-proliferation, continues to abide by its obligations under the NPT, and will work to strengthen the NPT regime.”¹⁷ Of the four NPRs conducted by the United States since 1994, only one, the Obama administration’s 2010 review, specifically references Article VI on the NPT in publicly released documents.¹⁸ The failure to specifically reference Article VI in itself is not a big deal. The more legitimate question is whether the Trump administration feels if it has an obligation to pursue disarmament.

Evaporating support for arms control initiatives by the Republican Party, especially in Congress, is also a cause for concern. If arms control is to have a long-term future, new efforts will be required to build a bipartisan consensus in favor of such treaties and agreements that advance U.S. security interests. Better integration of arms control with U.S. deterrence and stability requirements is key to developing this consensus.

In addition, there are several essential national security benefits that arms control provides, which are little appreciated in conservative circles. For example, while President Obama did not get everything right in the nuclear policy arena, it’s important for critics to acknowledge that his nuclear policies helped create a bipartisan consensus in favor of strategic nuclear modernization. Specifically, New START played a critical role in building support among congressional Democrats for the strategic nuclear modernization program.

Anti-nuclear feelings run high among the publics in many allied countries, especially in Norway, the Netherlands, Germany, and Japan. Arms control and non-proliferation agreements play an essential role in helping allied governments build domestic political consensus to support nuclear deterrence, especially with regard to hosting U.S. assets on their territory, and procuring dual-capable aircraft.

And finally, as the NPR acknowledges, arms control can complement U.S. defense planning. For example, strategic arms control agreements like New START, by bounding the threat and providing transparency and predictability, have enabled U.S. defense planners to design and deploy with confidence an effective deterrent that can survive a first strike by an adversary.

Extended deterrence

Despite widespread criticism of its management of alliance relationships, the Trump administration’s consultations with allies in the context of the NPR stand out as an exception to the rule. Similar to the 2010 NPR, the 2018 NPR established an effective consultation process that enabled allies to provide input and help shape the review. Based on publicly available information, allied governments appear to be satisfied both with the consultative mechanisms and with the document’s final conclusions. Such consultation is essential to maintaining alliance cohesion and support.

In a February 2, 2018 statement on the NPR, Japanese Foreign Minister Taro Kono stated: “Japan highly appreciates the latest NPR which clearly articulates the U.S. resolve to ensure the effectiveness of its deterrence and its commitment to providing extended deterrence to its allies, including Japan.”¹⁹ The only negative public comment about the NPR from a senior allied official came from Sigmar Gabriel, German foreign minister

16 The Treaty on the Non-proliferation of Nuclear Weapons, July 1, 1968, <http://www.un.org/en/conf/npt/2005/npptreaty.html>.

17 U.S. Department of Defense, “Nuclear Posture Review 2018,” 70.

18 The United States has conducted Nuclear Posture Reviews in 1994 (Clinton), 2002 (Bush), 2010 (Obama), 2018 (Trump).

19 “Release of the Nuclear Posture Review: Statement of Foreign Minister Taro Kono,” Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Japan, February 2, 2018, http://www.mofa.go.jp/press/release/press4e_001893.html.

at the time the document was released. According to press reports, Gabriel criticized the NPR and called on Europe “to begin new initiatives for arms control and disarmament.”²⁰ However, it is unlikely that Gabriel’s views were fully representative of the German government, especially the Chancellery and the Ministry of Defense, which are occupied by members of the center-right Christian Democrat Union (CDU) party.

The NPR devotes significant attention to extended deterrence and recommends several specific actions to enhance U.S. and allied capabilities.²¹ These include acquiring the B-21 bomber and LRSO cruise missile, developing a new nuclear-armed sea-launched cruise missile (SLCM), enhancing the readiness and survivability of NATO dual-capable aircraft, and working with allies “to improve our shared understanding of nuclear dangers and corresponding deterrence requirements through continued consultative dialogues.”²² Overall, the NPR is good for extended deterrence.

Declaratory policy

Similar to the 2010 NPR, the 2018 review states: “The United States would only consider the use of nuclear weapons in extreme circumstances to defend the vital interest of the United States, its allies, and partners.”²³ However, unlike the 2010 NPR, the most recent review explicitly defines “extreme circumstances” to include “significant non-nuclear strategic attacks.”²⁴ It’s not clear why the Trump administration felt further clarification of U.S. declaratory policy was necessary. Unfortunately, the clarification has fueled a public narrative that the United States is expanding the instances when it would use nuclear weapons. This was probably not the intention of the review’s authors, but it will require senior administration

officials to constantly address the issue. It is a self-inflicted wound that will likely fester for some time and provide propaganda fodder for Russia.

New low-yield nuclear capabilities

The NPR recommends that the United States “pursue select supplements” to the Obama administration’s strategic nuclear modernization program to “enhance the flexibility and responsiveness of U.S. nuclear forces.”²⁵ These supplements include developing a new low-yield warhead for the D-5 submarine-launched ballistic missile (SLBM) and a new SLCM deployed on attack submarines and surface ships. Several analysts have argued that these supplemental capabilities will lower the threshold for nuclear use. However, the United States currently deploys several low-yield nuclear weapons in its arsenal (e.g., the B-61 gravity bomb and the air-launched cruise missile) and was modernizing its low-yield capabilities under the Obama administration’s program of record (e.g., B-61-12, LRSO). Therefore, it’s difficult to imagine how introducing a modified D-5 warhead or a new SLCM is going to “lower the threshold” for nuclear use. If the United States needed to employ a low-yield nuclear option today, it could do so.

The key question is not whether these new capabilities will “lower the threshold for nuclear use,” but whether additional lower yield capabilities—beyond the B-61-12 and LRSO—are needed to maintain effective deterrence against Russia and others. From my perspective, as long as the United States moves forward with deployment of the B-61-12 gravity bomb and the LRSO cruise missile, that should be sufficient to deter the threat from Russia’s non-strategic nuclear forces and other potential adversaries.

20 “Nuclear weapons: Germany’s Sigmar Gabriel calls on Europe to lead disarmament push,” *Deutsche Welle*, February 24, 2018, <http://www.dw.com/en/nuclear-weapons-germanys-sigmar-gabriel-calls-on-europe-to-lead-disarmament-push/a-42449629>.

21 U.S. Department of Defense, “Nuclear Posture Review 2018,” 34-37.

22 *Ibid.*, 37.

23 *Ibid.*, 21.

24 *Ibid.*, 21.

25 *Ibid.*, 52.

However, of the two supplemental capabilities the NPR proposes, a strong case can be made for developing a new nuclear-armed SLCM as a complement to the B-61-12 and LRSO. Such a capability could serve as a hedge against longer-term advances in anti-submarine warfare capabilities, as this would increase the number of nuclear-armed submarines;²⁶ provide a treaty-compliant response to Russia's violation of the Intermediate-Range Nuclear Forces (INF) Treaty; and enhance extended deterrence, especially with Japan and the Republic of Korea, by providing a prompt response option. Japan was initially concerned by the retirement of the Tomahawk Land Attack Missile-Nuclear (TLAM-N) SLCM in 2010, and Japanese officials have generally welcomed U.S. plans to reintroduce this capability.

A decision to proceed with the development of a nuclear-armed SLCM will face two key challenges. First, it is unclear where the administration will find the additional resources to pay for the new system. However, developing a sea-based version of the LRSO might be an affordable option. Second, the U.S. Navy has traditionally been ambivalent about deploying nuclear-armed systems on surface vessels and attack submarines. The Obama administration's decision in the 2010 NPR to retire the TLAM-N nuclear-armed cruise missile was, in large part, driven by the Navy's reluctance to fund and sustain the program.

I find the case for the low-yield D-5 warhead to be less compelling and question whether there truly is a "gap" in our theater-level deterrence posture in Europe, as the NPR claims. On the other hand, I am also uncertain that placing a low-yield warhead on the D-5 missile would undermine stability and increase the chances of miscalculation, as some have claimed. For example, the United Kingdom has deployed low-yield warheads on its SSBNs for

over a decade,²⁷ and few experts have claimed that this deployment has undermined stability.²⁸

Russian vs. Chinese nuclear doctrine

There is no doubt that China represents a potential threat to the United States and its allies. Nevertheless, it is not fully clear why the NPR lumps China in with Russia in the nuclear context, given that their approaches to nuclear weapons policy differ significantly. First, though China has been actively modernizing its strategic nuclear forces over a decade (e.g., deployment of mobile intercontinental-range ballistic missiles and ballistic missile submarines), and its nuclear forces have certainly become more survivable, there's no evidence that it seeks to move beyond a "minimum deterrent" force or pursue nuclear parity with the United States. Second, Russia has made numerous nuclear threats against other countries, while China has not. To the contrary, China continues to maintain its "no first use" of nuclear weapons policy.

The primary challenge from China is its attempt to tilt the balance of power in the Western Pacific in its favor through a major conventional force build-up and development of anti-access, area denial and "asymmetric" capabilities (e.g., counter-space, cyber). While it is imperative that the United States continue to deter China's nuclear forces, its primary concern should be focused on countering China's efforts to gain conventional superiority in the Western Pacific.

Ground-launched cruise missiles (GLCM)

The NPR also recommends that the United States "commence INF Treaty-compliant research and development by reviewing military concepts for conventional, ground-launched, intermediate-range missile defenses" in response to Russia's violation

26 The NPR does not rule out also deploying nuclear-armed SLCMs on surface vessels.

27 Austin Long, "Discrimination Details Matter Clarifying Argument About Low-Yield Nuclear Warhead," *War on the Rocks*, February 16, 2018, <https://warontherocks.com/2018/02/discrimination-details-matter-clarifying-argument-low-yield-nuclear-warheads/>.

28 For a more detailed discussion of the issues associated with deploying low-yield warheads on SSBNs, see Franklin C. Miller, "Addressing Fears About The Nuclear Posture Review and Limited Nuclear Use," *War on the Rocks*, February 28, 2018, <https://warontherocks.com/2018/02/addressing-fears-nuclear-posture-review-limited-nuclear-use/>.

on the INF Treaty.²⁹ As I noted in testimony before the House Strategic Forces Subcommittee in March 2017,³⁰ the challenge with conducting research and developing a new GLCM is that once the system is developed, where would it be deployed? For example, public protests in reaction to NATO's decision to deploy intermediate-range ballistic missiles and GLCMs in Europe in the 1980s almost broke the alliance. In addition, the recent decision to deploy the Terminal High Altitude Area Defense (THAAD) missile defense system in the Republic of Korea has been highly controversial.³¹ Given the political challenges associated with basing GLCMs on foreign territory, it would be wiser to invest those funds into developing a conventional variant of the LRSO or a new SLCM. Air- and sea-launched systems would not require the United States to negotiate basing rights with host nations and could meet military requirements. Either approach would have the added benefit of being INF Treaty-compliant, while a U.S. GLCM would be as treaty non-compliant as the Russian GLCM.³²

IMPLEMENTATION CHALLENGES

President Trump's public statements on nuclear weapons

There are two key issues that will fundamentally impact the Trump administration's ability to implement the NPR over the long term: President Trump's personal rhetoric on nuclear policy and the affordability of the strategic nuclear modernization program. Unlike previous presidents who used careful language when discussing nuclear

weapons, President Trump has taken a different approach, using inflammatory language to describe his approach to nuclear policy. Some of his more controversial statements include:

- "Let it be an arms race;"³³
- "... we will have no choice but to totally destroy North Korea. Rocket Man is on a suicide mission for himself and for his regime. The United States is ready, willing and able;"³⁴ and
- "I too have a Nuclear Button, but it is a much bigger & more powerful one than his, and my Button works!"³⁵

Conversely, senior Trump administration officials have generally been thoughtful and restrained in their public statements on nuclear policy. However, make no mistake, the president's statements are impacting the administration's ability to effectively articulate its message on the NPR, and have the potential to undermine the current bipartisan consensus in favor of strategic nuclear modernization.

For example, in the U.S. domestic political context, mainstream congressional Democrats are beginning to take a more skeptical view on nuclear weapons issues, largely in reaction to President Trump. The Trump administration should view this as a potential warning sign. At the same time, Democrats need to acknowledge, as the Council on Foreign Relations' Max Boot writes, "Trump won't

29 U.S. Department of Defense, "Nuclear Posture Review 2018," 10.

30 Frank A. Rose, "Consequences and Context for Russia's Violations of the INF Treaty," (testimony before the House Armed Services Committee, Subcommittee on Strategic Forces, Washington, DC, March 30, 2017), <http://docs.house.gov/meetings/FA/FA18/20170330/105811/HHRG-115-FA18-Wstate-RoseF-20170330.pdf>.

31 "THAAD Controversy Threatens Bumpy Ties with US," *Chosunilbo*, May 2, 2017, http://english.chosun.com/site/data/html_dir/2017/05/02/2017050201313.html.

32 Research and development of INF-range systems is permitted under the INF Treaty, but flight testing and deployment is not.

33 Carrie Dann, "Donald Trump on Nukes: Let it be an arms race," *NBC News*, December 23, 2016, <https://www.nbcnews.com/politics/politics-news/trump-nukes-let-it-be-arms-race-n699526>.

34 Ali Vatali, "Trump Threatens to 'Totally Destroy' North Korea in First U.N. Speech," *NBC News*, September 19, 2017, <https://www.nbcnews.com/politics/white-house/trump-un-north-korean-leader-suicide-mission-n802596>.

35 "Trump to Kim: My nuclear button is 'bigger and more powerful,'" *BBC*, January 3, 2018, <http://www.bbc.com/news/world-asia-42549687>.

be president forever.”³⁶ Therefore, they should be careful about allowing their reactions to Trump to prompt them to “make long-term decisions that will undercut the nuclear deterrent commanded by his successors.”³⁷

Loose talk regarding nuclear weapons could also damage our deterrence relationships with allies. As noted previously, nuclear weapons are deeply unpopular with the publics in many allied countries. Certain allied governments struggle to maintain a domestic political consensus in favor of nuclear deterrence. President Trump’s public statements have made an already difficult task even harder.

Why should the United States really care what our allies think? The response to this question is simple: The United States needs its allies’ support to effectively deter and defend itself from strategic threats. For example, the upgraded early warning radars in Greenland and the United Kingdom provide early warning against strategic missile attack, and directly support the missile defense of the United States; the two forward-deployed radars based in Japan support regional and U.S. homeland missile defense; and the relay ground stations and other communications facilities around the world directly support U.S. nuclear command and control systems. Fundamentally, the security of the U.S. homeland is intricately linked with the security of its allies. Therefore, it is critical that the United States remain attuned to allied concerns, especially their unique domestic political situations, and avoid loose rhetoric that inflames alliance relations.

Affordability of the strategic nuclear modernization program

The second long-term challenge for NPR implementation deals with the issue of the strategic nuclear modernization program’s affordability. While Trump administration officials have generally sought to downplay the costs associated with the strategic nuclear modernization program, there are legitimate concerns as to whether the modernization program outlined in the NPR can be executed within projected defense budgets.

For example, the Congressional Budget Office (CBO) estimates that the Obama administration’s program of record would have cost at least \$1.2 trillion over 30 years.³⁸ At a recent panel discussion at the Center for Strategic and International Studies in Washington, DC, Secretary of the Navy Richard Spencer was more candid about the costs. According to press reports, he noted that the cost of the Columbia-class submarine “will make your eyes water. Columbia will be a \$100 billion program for its lifetime. ... I think we have to have big discussions about it.”³⁹ Though defense budgets are scheduled to increase in fiscal years 2018 and 2019, President Trump’s own budget projections show defense spending flat-lining in fiscal year 2020. In addition, with the modernization program in its early phases, the costs of the program will almost certainly grow as the systems mature. Therefore, it’s imperative that effective oversight mechanisms are put in place to ensure that the programs are delivered on time and within budget. It will also require sustained funding for the program by Congress.

36 Max Boot, “Trump won’t be president forever. Nuclear policy shouldn’t pretend he will,” *The Washington Post*, February 8, 2018, https://www.washingtonpost.com/opinions/global-opinions/trump-wont-be-president-forever-nuclear-policy-shouldnt-pretend-he-will/2018/02/08/6eba8a98-0cd6-11e8-8890-372e2047c935_story.html?utm_term=.88a0f7ab2957.

37 Ibid.

38 Congressional Budget Office, “Approaches for Managing the Costs of U.S. Nuclear Forces, 2017 to 2046,” (Washington, DC: Congressional Budget Office, October 2017), <https://www.cbo.gov/system/files/115th-congress-2017-2018/reports/53211-nuclearforces.pdf>.

39 Travis J. Tritten, “Costs of new nuclear sub is ‘eye watering,’ Navy secretary says,” *The Washington Examiner*, March 12, 2018, <https://www.washingtonexaminer.com/policy/defense-national-security/cost-of-new-nuclear-subs-is-eye-watering-navy-secretary-says>.

CONCLUDING THOUGHTS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

There are a number of specific steps that the Trump administration could take to improve the chances that the NPR will be successfully implemented.

- **When publicly discussing nuclear weapons, words really do matter.** Historically, this is why U.S. government officials have been careful about how they have discussed nuclear weapons publicly. When they have not, such as when former defense official T.K. Jones said “if there are enough shovels to go around, everybody will make it” through a nuclear war,⁴⁰ the political ramifications have been significant. Indeed, Jones’ comments, and others, helped fuel the nuclear freeze movement in the United States and public opposition in Europe to NATO’s deployment of intermediate-range missiles and cruise missiles. Given the potential for controversial statements to impact domestic and allied political support of nuclear deterrence, the Trump administration—at all levels—should carefully calibrate its public statements.
- **Consistent engagement with the U.S. Congress and the public is critical to building and maintaining support.** As Michael Ruhle writes: “Many in the West believed that the end of the Cold War also meant the obsolescence of nuclear deterrence. The role of nuclear weapons as tools of deterrence and war prevention was pushed into the background.”⁴¹ As a result, the United States has not had a serious national debate about the role and purpose of nuclear weapons and deterrence in over 30 years. If congressional and public support for nuclear deterrence and the strategic modernization program are to be maintained, officials need to stay

actively engaged in the public debate. One of the key mistakes the Obama administration made in its management of the strategic nuclear modernization program was ceding the public narrative to the opponents of the program early on. It did not take corrective action until the very end of the administration. The Trump administration would be wise not to make the same mistake.

- **Take pragmatic action to advance arms control and non-proliferation initiatives where practical.** Arms control and non-proliferation initiatives play an important role in building domestic and allied support for nuclear deterrence, as well as advancing overall U.S. security. Therefore, Trump administration should take pragmatic steps in this area in order to help maintain a durable bipartisan consensus on nuclear policy. Specific steps it could take include: remaining in the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action with Iran; extending New START, which allows for a five-year extension by mutual consent;⁴² increasing funding for global threat reduction programs; examining options for bilateral and multilateral nuclear risk reduction mechanisms; and urging the U.S. Senate to provide its advice and consent to the nuclear-weapons-free zone protocols. At the same time, arms control agreements must be better integrated with U.S. deterrence and stability requirements to help foster support among Republicans.
- **Conduct strategic stability talks with Russia; develop a new framework for U.S.-Russia strategic stability.** Given the rising tensions with Moscow, the Trump administration should continue the strategic stability talks with Russia that began in 2017. These talks should be focused on reducing

40 Sam Roberts, “T.K. Jones, 82 dies; Arms Officials Who Saw Nuclear War as Survivable,” *The New York Times*, May 23, 2015, <https://www.nytimes.com/2015/05/24/us/thomas-k-jones-us-arms-negotiator-dies-at-82.html>.

41 Michael Ruhle, “The New Nuclear Reality,” *Berlin Policy Journal*, February 16, 2015, <https://berlinpolicyjournal.com/the-nuclear-reality/>.

42 According to numerous press reports, Russia has signaled its willingness to extend New START.

the risks of miscalculation and enhancing stability. Additionally, with prospects for further negotiated reductions looking increasingly remote, it should explore what an alternative U.S.-Russia strategic stability framework might look like.

- **Engage China on strategic stability.** The NPR recommends that the U.S. and China begin a “meaningful dialogue” on nuclear policy, doctrine, and capabilities, which is a positive step. While China has traditionally been reluctant to engage in a robust government-to-government dialogue on strategic issues, during the last several years of the Obama administration, China did show a willingness to engage more actively in fora such as the U.S.-China Strategic Security Dialogue and the U.S.-China Space Security Talks. The Trump administration should build on this foundation.
- **Engage U.S. allies on the importance of nuclear deterrence; don’t cede the international debate to others.** The Trump administration did an excellent job consulting allied governments during deliberations on the NPR. This engagement should continue. Senior administration officials must also engage nongovernmental experts, the general public, and the press in allied countries. If the United States fails to propagate an effective narrative of nuclear deterrence among citizens of allied countries, potential adversaries, such as Russia and China, will fill the void. This is clearly not in the interest of the United States or its allies.
- **Don’t simply dismiss affordability concerns associated with strategic nuclear modernization; put in place mechanisms to effectively manage them.** With a few exceptions, Trump administration officials have downplayed concerns about the long-term affordability of the strategic nuclear modernization program. While I generally agree with their assessment that the program

is probably affordable, the potential for program cost growth and unstable budgets is significant. Therefore, senior officials in the White House, the Department of Defense, and Office of Management and Budget will need to provide effective oversight of the program to ensure that it is delivered within budget and on schedule, while working closely with Congress to ensure consistent funding.

In summary, the Trump administration has developed an NPR that is responsive to the threats faced by the United States and its allies. However, it’s uncertain whether or not the administration can use the document to build a sustainable consensus on nuclear policy. Both the president’s controversial public statements and the hefty price tag of the strategic nuclear modernization program represent key challenges to fostering and maintaining that consensus. However, the Trump administration’s chances of success will improve if it is able to calibrate its public messages; effectively engage the U.S. Congress, general public, and allies on the importance of nuclear deterrence; advance pragmatic arms control and non-proliferation initiatives; and enhance strategic stability with potential adversaries such as Russia and China.

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ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

The author would also like to thank the following individuals for their advice, input, and comments on drafts: Robert Einhorn, Michael O'Hanlon, Kate Hewitt, Maggie Tennis, and Bruce MacDonald.

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