

PAYNE: Hope masquerading as experience

Obama plan elevates nonproliferation above deterrence

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The Obama administration recently released its 2010 Nuclear Posture Review (NPR), which, along with the New START treaty with Russia, provides the basic directions in U.S. nuclear policy.

On the positive side, the NPR builds on the earlier 1994 and 2001 NPRs to align U.S. nuclear policy with the realities of the post-Cold War strategic world. It offers few extreme departures and thus did not satisfy the most ardent anti-nuclear crowd.

For example, the NPR rightly calls for U.S. strategic forces to be resilient and flexible. It endorses the goal of deploying effective ballistic missile defenses, the preservation of most U.S. nuclear capabilities, the continuation of the U.S. nuclear umbrella, the assurance of allies and the maintenance of the traditional nuclear triad of air-, sea- and land-based strategic nuclear missiles and bombers. It also supports badly needed steps to modernize the U.S. nuclear production infrastructure. Implementation remains to be seen, but policy guidance is the necessary first step.

As important as what the NPR does is what it does not do. It rejects an official announcement that the United States will not be the first to use nuclear weapons in a conflict. Such a nuclear no-first-use policy may sound progressive, but it would tell opponents they can use deadly biological or chemical weapons without fear of our nuclear deterrent. A desperate enemy contemplating the use of such weapons in a crisis might find a rationale for doing so in a U.S. no-first-use policy. It would, as the commander of the French strategic air force said in July 2009, "give a green light to biological attacks." The NPR prudently did not do so.

Where the 2010 NPR might at first glance appear to embrace the nuclear zero agenda, it wisely walks back from the edge. For example, the NPR expands U.S. "negative security assurances," i.e., promises that the United States will not threaten or use nuclear weapons against particular states. Yet, the NPR also contains critical exceptions, including for situations involving North Korea and Iran. Secretary of State Hillary Rodham Clinton further clarified by saying that if any enemy uses biological weapons, "all bets are off."

The NPR also seems to endorse another staple of the nuclear zero agenda, the rejection of any "new" U.S. nuclear capabilities with the statement that we can maintain an "effective

deterrent without the development of new nuclear warheads." That is a hope masquerading as a fact. New nuclear capabilities may be helpful or even necessary on occasion to deter future wars. To forswear the option of developing new nuclear deterrent capabilities now without first bringing an end to war would be akin to halting the development of new medicines because they can be risky.

Fortunately, senior U.S. officials have clarified the NPR and walked it back from a rigid no "new" nuclear capabilities line. They have said that if new nuclear capabilities are deemed necessary, the administration's policy would not preclude their development and the NPR's commitment to restoring the U.S. nuclear infrastructure would help keep the option real. The vice chairman of the Joint Chiefs, Gen. James Cartwright, stated in an April 6 press briefing, "We don't know what five years from now might bring.... Nobody has ever removed from the commander... the ability to say 'I'm uncomfortable ... we're going to have to build something new.' " Senior Department of Defense official James Miller testified on April 15, "The infrastructure and the intellectual capital necessary to do that would be in place so there would be a policy choice."

The 2010 NPR falls short in a number of respects. First, it appears to assume that future relations with Russia will be amicable, or at least benign. This NPR contains nary a word to the contrary, nor any apparent hedges against the possibility of a darker future. The previous 1994 and 2001 NPRs acknowledged and attempted to facilitate more amicable U.S. relations with Russia, but did not pretend that unalloyed optimism is the only basis for considering the future. Since those earlier NPRs, Russian threats to U.S. friends and allies have become sharper in word and deed, yet the 2010 NPR offers nothing about how the United States should and will hedge against a continuing downturn in relations.

Second, the NPR explicitly elevates a "nuclear-free world" and nonproliferation to the highest priority of U.S. nuclear policy. It states, "For the first time, the 2010 NPR places this priority atop the U.S. nuclear agenda." The NPR emphasizes that reducing the roles and numbers of U.S. nuclear weapons provides "a much stronger position" to gain international support for nonproliferation measures. The expectation of this beneficial rallying effect is based on hope, not experience, and is a thin reed upon which to make any critical decisions - especially when we know that U.S. nuclear weapons contribute to our nonproliferation goals by assuring allies that they do not need their own nuclear weapons. A rigid elevation of nuclear zero to highest policy priority could conflict with the maintenance of the U.S. ability to deter future war. Will the administration protect U.S. deterrence capabilities when trade-offs among these goals must be made? The administration's New START treaty offers grounds for concern.

For example, while the NPR points to the increasing deterrence role for new, advanced conventional weapons and missile defenses, New START actually places limits on those very weapons and gives Russia direct and indirect entry to limit U.S. missile defense deployment. The NPR identifies the placing of multiple warheads on ICBMs (i.e., MIRVing) as destabilizing and directs that all U.S. ICBMs be "de-MIRVED ... to increase stability." Yet, New START eliminates all past MIRV limits and essentially

encourages Russia's building of new heavily MIRVed ICBMs. Apparently, only U.S. MIRVs are destabilizing.

In addition, the NPR emphasizes the resilience of U.S. strategic forces, but New START limits their resilience by mandating a lower ceiling on deployed bombers and missiles than was earlier suggested publicly by senior Defense Department and military officials, and by effectively requiring only U.S. force reductions - a fact Russians have noticed. Russian strategic analyst Aleksey Arbatov notes in a March 5 Russian article: "The new treaty is an agreement on reducing the American and not the Russian [strategic nuclear forces]. In fact the latter will be reduced in any case because of the mass removal from the order of battle of obsolete arms and the one-at-a-time introduction of new systems." Russian defense journalist Alexander Golts similarly writes in the Moscow Times that Russia can "fulfill its pledge without eliminating a single actual weapon. The same is true regarding warheads."

Finally, the NPR points to further nuclear reductions that would demand greater transparency and more intrusive verification provisions. Yet, New START's verification provisions are a step backward and seem designed to deny the United States information on Russia's mobile ICBMs and new weapons. While NPR implementation remains to be seen, as clarified, it provides some helpful direction for U.S. nuclear policy. Unfortunately, New START appears to undermine that direction, a fact the Senate may help rectify in its ratification process; the administration should be happy to oblige.

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