

## The US Nuclear Posture Review: what's new, what's not

by Rod Lyon

59

8 April 2010

The long-awaited Nuclear Posture Review (NPR) has now been released by the United States. It is a carefully-nuanced document and merits a close reading. At its core is a measured re-phrasing of the US Negative Security Assurance, meant to diminish the previous level of intentional ambiguity surrounding possible US nuclear weapons use, and to suggest that the US is taking seriously its commitment to reduce the role of nuclear weapons in US strategy. But there are also strong themes of continuity in the document. In accordance with longstanding US nuclear policy, the NPR does not provide a 'no-first-use' declaration (under which a nuclear weapon state would declare that it would not use its nuclear weapons first in a conflict). Moreover, the NPR reaffirms that nuclear deterrence remains a core element of US strategic thinking, and notes that 'nuclear forces will continue to play an essential role in deterring potential adversaries and reassuring allies and partners around the world.'<sup>1</sup>

### The reconstructed Negative Security Assurance

Since 1978 the US has provided an assurance that it will not use nuclear weapons against non-nuclear-weapon states party to the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty (NPT), who are faithfully adhering to the treaty's obligations. They have, however, added two caveats to that assurance. Firstly, they have said that the assurance would not hold if such a state was acting in 'association or alliance' with a nuclear weapon state to attack the US, its military forces or its allies. Essentially, that caveat was a mechanism to permit the US to target Warsaw Pact countries allied to the Soviet Union during Cold War days. After the crumbling of the Warsaw Pact there have been no alliance structures that might threaten direct aggression against US or allied strategic interests, so the caveat has had no direct applicability. Still, it survived into the 1990s as a doctrinal formulation that was used by both the Clinton and Bush administrations. In the latest iteration of the assurance, the Obama administration has deleted that 'alliance' caveat.

A second caveat was applied to the assurance during the Bush administration, when a State Department spokesman repeated the standard Negative Security Assurance but added a further qualification: that if 'weapons of mass destruction' were used against the US or its allies, the US would not rule out any specific type of military response. Since weapons of mass destruction are usually taken to include chemical and biological weapons

as well as nuclear weapons, this caveat has usually been interpreted as meaning that the use of chemical or biological weapons on the US or its allies would provide the basis for US nuclear retaliation, regardless of the NPT-status of the aggressor. The Obama administration have reworded this caveat, to say that a chemical or biological weapons attack on the US or its allies by a non-nuclear-weapon state, party to the NPT, that was otherwise in compliance with its non-nuclear obligations, would result not in a US nuclear response, but in a 'devastating' conventional-weapon response being visited upon the aggressor.

It is the rewording of the second caveat that seems to have grabbed most of the media headlines. And it is certainly a shift in doctrinal position, although perhaps not one as significant as some media reports suggest. In a practical sense, to whom could the new assurance apply? Well, it would have to apply to states that have offensive chemical and biological weapons arsenals, but are non-nuclear-weapon members of the NPT in good standing. Only a relatively small number of states fit into this category. Indeed, those countries which might have offensive chemical and biological programs can be listed as follows:

- India, Libya, Russia, South Korea and the US have declared themselves possessors of chemical weapons under the Chemical Weapons Convention, and all have announced their intention to destroy their stocks by the convention's deadline of 29 April 2012
- in addition, countries suspected of having offensive chemical weapons include Iran, China, Egypt, Israel, North Korea and Syria
- countries currently suspected of having an offensive biological weapon capability include China, Cuba, Egypt, Israel, North Korea, Russia, Syria and Taiwan.<sup>2</sup>

If we delete from those lists nuclear weapon states (Russia and China), non-members of the NPT (Israel, India, and North Korea), and non-nuclear-weapon states party to the NPT but with more dubious nonproliferation credentials (Iran), then the chemical and biological warfare (CBW) part of the newly-recrafted Negative Security Assurance 'reassures' only a handful of states: namely, Libya, South Korea, Egypt, Syria, Cuba and Taiwan. South Korea and Taiwan are US allies or partners, and Libya's weapons of mass destruction programs have been in reverse since 2003. Moreover, the new version of the assurance reassures those states only that they could expect to be devastated by conventional and not nuclear weapons if they were sufficiently foolish to attack the US or its allies with chemical or biological weapons. The number of chemical weapons arsenals in the world is probably shrinking. But the future of biological weapons is less certain, and the NPR makes clear that the US retains the right to reconsider its position if biotechnological advances make biological weapons more potent (increasing the dangers associated with such an attack) or more common (substantially expanding the group of states to which the assurance would apply).

Still, the redrafting of the Negative Security Assurance is interesting. It shows that the Obama administration wants to reward nonproliferation. And it clearly wants to find a halfway-house somewhere between a no-first-use declaration and previous strategic ambiguity. It can probably sell to US allies those new, narrower conditions of US use of nuclear weapons under existing extended deterrence arrangements—but it will be selling them on the basis that relatively little has actually changed in US options to come to its allies' assistance.

## **Nuclear symbolism?**

The release of the NPR is about much more than a recrafting of US nuclear policy, however. Timing alone means there's a fair bit of symbolism in the release of this new NPR. Its release date misses by only a day the anniversary of Obama's Prague speech last year, precedes by a couple of days his return to Prague to sign

a new Strategic Arms Reduction Treaty (New START) with President Medvedev of Russia, and anticipates both his Nuclear Security Summit in Washington later this month and the NPT Review Conference in New York in May.

Obama knows he can't shift the nuclear numbers around much, especially with the follow-on to the START Treaty locking in US and Russian arsenal configurations and counting rules. He knows, too, that nuclear disarmament is not just around the corner—and that any precipitate US 'race to the bottom' in terms of nuclear numbers and roles would only damage US strategic interests and spook allies. But he has used the Review to signal a shift in US concern from other nuclear-armed states to nuclear terrorists and proliferating states, and that is clearly a message that the Nuclear Security Summit will underline. Further, the revamped Negative Security Assurance is patently intended to make NPT membership, and nonproliferation compliance, more attractive to non-nuclear-weapon states, and that should play well at the NPT Review Conference.

Arms-controllers who hoped the NPR would define a major shift in US nuclear policy will probably be disappointed. They might take some solace from the document's semi-endorsement of the 'sole purpose' position—the idea that nuclear weapon states should declare that the sole purpose of their nuclear arsenal is to deter others' nuclear weapon use. The Review does not accept—for now—that 'sole purpose' for US nuclear weapons, although it does accept it as an 'objective' that the US will work towards. The strategic reasoning for this decision to work towards conditions that would permit a 'sole purpose' declaration is not obvious—since when did deterring conflict more generally become a bad thing? The NPR is right that nuclear weapons no longer carry the burden of deterring a Soviet conventional attack that they did in the Cold War. But generically, nuclear weapons deter the most dangerous sort of conventional conflict—order-threatening conflicts, like World Wars I and II—and their doing so is strategically beneficial.

Some had hoped the NPR would point to a future US nuclear arsenal numbering only in the hundreds. It doesn't. Indeed, it notes that 'any future nuclear reductions must continue to strengthen deterrence of potential regional adversaries, strategic stability vis-à-vis Russia and China, and assurance of our allies and partners.'<sup>13</sup> And nor does it change the current 'alert status' of the US arsenal; it makes clear that US nuclear weapons never were on a 'hair-trigger', as some have described them, and that enhancing the arsenal's survivability—by revisiting the vexed issue of intercontinental ballistic missiles (ICBM) basing-modes—and improving command and control arrangements are pathways to giving the US president greater decision time in crises.

But the Review does reaffirm that the US sees no need for a new nuclear warhead and that it will continue not to conduct any nuclear tests. That commitment is bound to increase the concerns of some in Congress who worry about the ageing nuclear arsenal. The NPR argues in favour of Life Extension Programs for the critical warheads—the W-76 submarine-based warhead, the B-61 bomb, and the W-78 ICBM warhead—as a means to dilute those concerns. But the credibility of that argument is blurred somewhat by Robert Gates' rejection of it in September 2008, when he was Defense Secretary for the Bush administration. Gates' conclusion then was that 'ultimately, a reliable replacement warhead will be needed to sustain nuclear force capabilities, revitalize the nuclear infrastructure, and reduce the nuclear stockpile in a manner that is consistent with US security objectives.'<sup>14</sup>

Readers of the NPR shouldn't mistake the pledge not to build a new nuclear warhead for a pledge not to modernise the strategic arsenal more broadly: just about every leg of the traditional 'triad'—intercontinental ballistic missiles, sea-launched ballistic missiles and their associated submarines, and strategic bombers—is in need of modernisation in the coming decade or two.

## More continuity than change?

In truth, there are elements of both continuity and change in the latest NPR. Obama has turned out not to be a radical innovator of US nuclear policy—though he has bought on to enough of the disarmament agenda, like ‘sole purpose’, to make the life of his successors more difficult. Nuclear deterrence remains a central element of US strategic policy, and the US continues to ‘extend’ deterrence to a wide range of allies and partners. True, the document suggests the US is increasingly picking up nuclear missions through better conventional forces and better defensive systems, but it certainly isn’t the first Review to make that argument: the NPR that the Bush administration submitted to Congress in December 2001 also made exactly that point.

For allies, like Australia, the broad message is that the US nuclear ‘umbrella’ is getting smaller, but it is certainly not contracting abruptly. It is still broad enough to cover allies’ greatest strategic concerns, and so reassure them. The problem for the US about extended deterrence, though, remains what it always has been—convincing those allies that their vital interests would be as important to the US as they are in national capitals. This NPR, with its smaller umbrella and hints at a ‘sole purpose’ future, has made that task of persuasion no easier.

## Endnotes

- 1 US Department of Defense (2010) *Nuclear Posture Review Report*, p.v.  
<http://www.defense.gov/npr/docs/2010%20Nuclear%20Posture%20Review%20Report.pdf>
- 2 These lists are taken from Paul Kerr (2008) *Nuclear, biological and chemical weapons and missiles: status and trends*, Congressional Research Service Report for US Congress, RL30699, 20 February, pp CRS-14 and CRS-16
- 3 *Nuclear Posture Review Report*, p.xi
- 4 Samuel Bodman (Secretary of Energy) and Robert Gates (Secretary of Defense) (2008) ‘National security and nuclear weapons in the 21<sup>st</sup> century’, September, p.ii

## About the author

**Dr Rod Lyon** is Program Director for ASPI’s Strategy and International Program.

## About Policy Analysis

Generally written by ASPI experts, POLICY ANALYSIS is provided online to give readers timely, insightful opinion pieces on current strategic issues, with clear policy recommendations when appropriate. They reflect the personal views of the author and do not in any way express or reflect the views of the Australian Government or represent the formal position of ASPI on any particular issue.

ASPI  
Tel + 61 2 6270 5100  
Fax + 61 2 6273 9566  
Email [enquiries@aspi.org.au](mailto:enquiries@aspi.org.au)  
Web [www.aspi.org.au](http://www.aspi.org.au)

© The Australian Strategic Policy Institute Limited 2010

This publication is subject to copyright. Except as permitted under the *Copyright Act 1968*, no part of it may in any form or by any means (electronic, mechanical, microcopying, photocopying, recording or otherwise) be reproduced, stored in a retrieval system or transmitted without prior written permission. Enquiries should be addressed to the publishers.