

More nukes?

A case to develop low-yield atomic bombs, largely in response to Russia and China's advances over the years, forms the cornerstone of the Pentagon's 2018 Nuclear Posture Review (NPR), released this month. This represents a radical break from former President Barack Obama's 2010 NPR, which envisaged a reduced role for atomic weapons in defence, except in "extreme circumstances". The new NPR broadens "extreme circumstances" to mean responding to non-nuclear aggression on infrastructure and civilian population in the U.S. and its allies with low-yield weapons.

The new NPR conveniently distances the U.S. from any moral high ground, or the promise to eschew nuclear aggression against non-nuclear weapons states that complied with the non-proliferation regime. Instead, it seeks to capitalise on the trillion dollar modernisation of ageing U.S. nuclear arsenal that Mr. Obama had agreed on in return for Republican backing of the 2010 New Strategic Arms Reduction Treaty between the U.S. and Russia.

The new policy emphasis on low-yield weapons lends credence to the view that the renovation and upgrade of U.S. nuclear arsenals is being seen as an excuse to build usable nukes. To that extent, it merely reflects the larger dynamics of the 21st century arms race among the superpowers to amass smaller and supposedly less destructive nuclear weapons. An instance is the Chinese flight-testing of a hypersonic glide vehicle, which can destroy missiles through sheer impact of energy generated from this ultra-high speed warhead. The other is the growing perception in Western strategic communities that Russia is willing to use nuclear weapons to ward off retaliation in a conventional attack, under the so-called "escalate to de-escalate" strategy. Moscow's 2014 invasion of Ukraine has only deepened suspicions of Russian expansionism among European nations.

Conversely, U.S. installations of ballistic missile defence in Poland and Romania, to counter missile threats from Iran, have never impressed Russian President Vladimir Putin. Russia is designing a long-range submarine-launched nuclear torpedo that could potentially unleash radioactive contamination across vast areas.

A legitimate concern for Russia is the continued expansion of the North Atlantic Treaty Organisation, nearly three decades since the Cold War. The military bloc covers not just the nations of the erstwhile Eastern Bloc, but the Commonwealth of Independent States, carved out of the former Soviet Union.

Arms control experts have bemoaned the implication of the NPR as potentially blurring the distinction between conventional and nuclear conflict. Few expect a return soon to the sober discourse of the previous decade on arms control, given President Donald Trump's combative tone against North Korea's nuclear militarisation. However, the recent thaw in relations between Pyongyang and Seoul is a hopeful sign that a negotiated resolution of the nuclear imbroglio could be within reach.

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