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The U.S. “Nuclear Posture Review (NPR) 2010” and the Nuclear Security Summit

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The NPR 2010 and the Nuclear Security Summit

When President Barack Obama set out his new initiative toward a “world without nuclear weapons” in his Prague speech on April 5, 2009, there was a great deal of speculation about what his official nuclear policy would be. A year later, questions were answered when the Obama administration finally released its Nuclear Posture Review (NPR) on April 6, 2010. This document conducted by the U.S. Department of Defense sets out the nuclear policy, strategy, capabilities, and force posture for the next five to ten years. Since the end of the Cold War, every incoming administration has been required to release an NPR as part of the wider “Strategic Defense Reviews,” which also includes “The Quadrennial Defense Review (QDR),” “The Space Posture Review (SPR),” and “The Ballistic Missile Defense Review (BMDR).”

In general the NPR 2010 contains five main objectives for the United States regarding its nuclear forces and the approach to nuclear proliferation.

Preventing Nuclear Proliferation and Nuclear Terrorism. The NPR 2010 makes a strong emphasis on the need to prevent nuclear proliferation and terrorism. For the first time, the NPR gives top priority to discouraging other countries from pursuing and acquiring nuclear weapons as well as preventing nuclear terrorism. To meet its objectives in this regard,

the Obama administration spoke on the need to strengthen international organizations like the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA) and to enhance global cooperation for securing nuclear materials and impeding illicit nuclear trade. As well as international organization and global cooperation, arms control treaties will also receive renewed focus, including a New START (Strategic Arms Reduction Treaty) with Russia, ratification of the Comprehensive Test Ban Treaty, and reinforcing the Fissile Material Cut-Off Treaty.

Reduced Role of Nuclear Weapons. The Obama administration will be looking to reduce the role of U.S. nuclear weapons in both national security and military strategy. This will look to reducing the reliance of the United States on nuclear weapons as policy options and also to reduce their numbers as well. To emphasize this change in policy, the NPR 2010 formalizes a “negative security assurance” which means no use or threat to use nuclear weapons against non-nuclear weapon states in compliance with the Non-Proliferation Treaty (NPT). This contrasts starkly with the policy of the previous Bush administration, which stated in its NPR 2002, the possibility of using tactical nuclear weapons in response to chemical or biological attacks or even against terrorist bases inside caves or bunkers. Despite this change, the NPR 2010 has one caveat to its “negative security assurance,” that the United States still reserves the right to use nuclear weapons

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against states that have withdrawn or are in violation of the NPT, for example North Korea.

Maintaining Deterrence and Stability at Reduced Nuclear Force Levels. Strategic deterrence and stability at reduced nuclear force levels is a key objective for the United States in the NPR 2010. To achieve this, Washington will seek to establish stable relations with Russia and China in order to maintain strategic deterrence, reinforce stability, and importantly prevent accidental nuclear war through mutual misunderstandings. Immediately upon the release of the NPR 2010, President Obama signed a New START agreement with Russia in Prague on April 8, 2010. The New START limits the number of deployable strategic nuclear warheads to 1,550 and the number of launch vehicles, missiles, submarines, and bombers, to 800. The nuclear triad of Inter-Continental Ballistic Missiles, Submarine Launched Ballistic Missiles, and nuclear-capable bombers will be preserved. However, all missiles will be “de-MIRVed” (Multiple Independently Targetable Re-entry Vehicle) that is each missile will have only one single warhead.

Strengthening Extended Deterrence. The NPR 2010 commits the United States to extended deterrence to its allies and partners against nuclear attack. Despite this commitment, non-nuclear capabilities will take on a larger share of extended deterrence as the role of nuclear weapons is increasingly reduced in the national security strategy of the United States. It is clear though that extended deterrence will not diminish.

Sustaining Provision of Nuclear Weapons. The United States promises to maintain its

nuclear weapons safely, securely, and effectively. Committed to not conducting any nuclear tests or the development of new nuclear warheads, Washington will maintain its nuclear weapons by using only components based on previously tested designs. This will include investment in its Life Extension Programs for nuclear weapons, more support for its research facilities, and the related workforce.

Shortly after the release of the NPR 2010, the United States hosted the first Nuclear Security Summit (NSS) in Washington D.C. April 12-13, 2010. This summit was part of the agenda set out by President Obama in his Prague speech that envisioned “world without nuclear weapons.” This remarkable summit brought together not only the five nuclear weapon states, but also three international organizations, which are the United Nations, the European Union, and the IAEA, and 42 other countries including states possessing nuclear weapons outside of the NPT such as India, Pakistan, and Israel. For two days, the major challenges toward the security of nuclear material and weapons were discussed. These major issues included enhancing nuclear security, restraining terrorist groups’ access to nuclear materials, and securing the non-proliferation regime. The summit also discussed those states that have withdrawn or are in violation of the NPT, including North Korea and Iran.

The NPR, NSS, and NPT Review Conference

In order to fully understand the nuclear strategy of the United States, a careful analysis is required of the NPR, the NSS, and also the NPT Review Conference which was held at the UN Headquarters in New York from May

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3-28, 2010. Since the release of the NPR, there has been rapid progress in efforts for denuclearization, signing of the New START in Prague, the NSS in Washington, and finally the NPT Review Conference in New York. With the NPT Review Conference, Ellen Tauscher, Under Secretary for Arms Control and International Security, crowned the conference as the final step in a so-called “nuclear spring.”

The NPR 2010 is not that different from President Obama’s speech on March 5, 2010, to commemorate the 40th anniversary of the NPT. In this speech, he spoke of reducing the number of nuclear warheads as well as limiting the role of nuclear weapons while maintaining a safe, secure, and effective nuclear deterrence. Furthermore, he added that disarmament, nonproliferation, and peaceful uses of nuclear energy are the three central pillars to his vision for a world without nuclear weapons. The NPR 2010 presents a flexible approach in responding to threats through the application of all weapon systems across the board including conventional options and missile defense. Such a new strategy is reminiscent of the Kennedy Administration’s Flexible Response policy, responding to threats with conventional forces as well as nuclear ones.

It remains unclear whether the new nuclear policy of the United States will achieve a “world without nuclear weapons” as President Obama hopes. Despite the NPR 2010 focus on disarmament and a reduced role for U.S. nuclear forces, the Obama administration still recognizes the need for nuclear weapons to deter a potential enemy’s attack as well as to reassure allies and partners. This new strategy will pursue the antinomic goal of reducing the role of nuclear arms while at the same time strengthening nuclear deterrence. Within the

United States, there is a large degree of agreement with the fundamental principle of reducing nuclear weapons. However, this should not come at the expense of weakening national security in any way. The United States must continue to maintain its “calculated ambiguity” with regards to its nuclear policy and always leave open the option for the use of nuclear weapons.

The NPR 2010 and the Korean Peninsula

This new nuclear strategy by the United States is likely to have some impact on its allies, including South Korea. Allies of the United States, particularly those that have experienced major threats to their sovereignty in the past like East European countries are concerned about the implications the NPR 2010 has toward the nuclear umbrella. If the United States does not exercise a strong commitment to its nuclear umbrella, then some allies like Japan or Turkey may consider developing their own nuclear programs.

In order to understand the security implications of the NPR 2010 for the Korea Peninsula, an overall analysis of the strategic defense strategy of the United States is needed, including the relationship between the major defense reports, such as the QDR and the BMDR. To some extent, this will enable us to anticipate future security influences on the Korean Peninsula. The QDR mentions the changes for U.S. Forces in Korea by making the force posture more “adaptive and flexible,” which will increase its strategic flexibility. Reduction of the role and the number of nuclear weapons emphasized in the NPR 2010 implies that the U.S. nuclear umbrella might be attenuated regardless of Washington’s intention.

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As part of the new nuclear strategy of the United States, the Department of Defense announced that it will retire TLAM/N (Tomahawk Land Attack Missile/Nuclear), reassuring that the extended deterrence to allies like South Korea and Japan will stand firm. However, South Korea still should make strong efforts to develop its own deterrence against the North Korean nuclear threat, while securing U.S. extended deterrence through strengthening the ROK-U.S. Alliance.

The main challenge for the Korean Peninsula is the North Korean nuclear crisis. North Korea has already shown opposition to the NPR. A few days after its release, on April 9, 2010, Pyongyang announced that it will increase and modernize its nuclear weapons as long as the United States poses a nuclear threat. The DPRK Foreign Ministry also strongly criticized the NPR 2010 for being no different from the Bush administration’s earlier policies, as the NPR excludes states like Iran and North Korea from its negative security pledge. Furthermore, this criticism was followed up by the release of North Korea’s own official “Memorandum on the Nuclear Issue” on April 21, 2010. In this statement, the Foreign Ministry asserted that North Korea will make efforts for the denuclearization of the Korean Peninsula and the world, regardless of whether the Six-Party Talks resume or not. The memorandum also stated that the DPRK will continue to produce nuclear weapons but will refrain from any kind of arms race and will participate in international disarmament efforts only as an equal with other nuclear states. Since its first nuclear test in October 2006, North Korea has continued to claim its status as a nuclear weapon state and called for disarmament negotiations. It continues to call itself a nuclear weapon state regardless of any

international recognition. Pyongyang is seemingly raising its leverage for future talks.

The timing of North Korea’s recent claim for its nuclear status is interesting. While the claim itself is nothing new, it is noticeable that it came shortly after March 26, 2010, sinking of the ROK Navy corvette *Cheonan*, which halted efforts to start the Six-Party Talks. It would appear that Pyongyang was trying to divert attention away from that incident while at the same time seeking to gain the upper hand with South Korea and the United States. At the same time, North Korea is also seeking to gain economic support from China by offering to resume the Six-Party Talks, which helps explain Kim Jong-il’s surprise trip to China on May 3, 2010. Even if North Korea returns to the Six-Party Talks, it will work to make its status as nuclear weapon state a *fait accompli* and gain as many benefits as possible from negotiations, by prolonging the talks for as long as possible. But Pyongyang should realize that that would make it to be a common enemy against a “world without nuclear weapons.” The North Korean regime needs to think seriously about why the Obama administration dubs it as an “outlier,” a state not covered by the negative security assurance. Secretary of State Hilary Clinton’s recent remarks on nuclear nonproliferation at the University of Louisville that North Korea has five to six nuclear weapons was not an acceptance of North Korea’s nuclear status but rather a call for its denuclearization. North Korea will not succeed to be recognized as a nuclear weapon state and therefore should return to the Six-Party Talks.

President Lee Myung-bak introduced Seoul’s efforts for non-proliferation at the Washington Nuclear Security Summit, as well publicized South Korea’s cutting-edge nuclear

plant operation systems, and announced that Seoul will host the 2nd nuclear summit in 2012. Nuclear power in South Korea accounts for as much as 40 percent of its electricity, yet the South Korean nuclear industry's reputation is at a disadvantage because of the North Korean nuclear crisis. Hosting the 2nd nuclear security summit will be a good opportunity to show South Korea's efforts to work for a denuclearized Korean Peninsula as well as expanding the right for peaceful use of nuclear energy as guaranteed under the NPT.

The NPR 2010 of the Obama administration is the first step toward a "world without nuclear weapons." While we may never know what kind of obstacles lie ahead, Obama's nuclear policy is an ambitious vision and an earnest appeal for the world that mankind needs to cooperate to face security threats of the world today. It remains to be seen how ideals and the reality will converge, and how the international community will respond to this appeal. ■

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