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Strategic Insights: Nuclear Posture Review: Three Reasons the Army Should Care

February 14, 2018 | Dr. Michael Fitzsimmons

Debate over the Trump administration's new *Nuclear Posture Review* (NPR) is now in full and predictable bloom. While many of its conclusions demonstrate continuity with the Obama administration's modernization plans, controversy has centered on two of the review's recommendations: to deploy new low-yield weapons on sea-launched ballistic and cruise missiles; and to signal the potential for nuclear retaliation against an adversary's non-nuclear strikes on certain critical targets.¹ Critics accuse the new policy of lowering the threshold for nuclear use.² The policy's authors and their defenders argue to the contrary that Russia's tactical nuclear arsenal and strategies have lowered the threshold for nuclear use, and buttressing U.S. deterrence capabilities is the safest response.³

It may be tempting for Army planners and strategists to reflect only briefly on these debates in thinking about Army priorities for plans, doctrine, and investments. After all, nuclear posture belongs to the Air Force and the Navy, right? Not exactly. Regardless of one's views on the debates over the current NPR, they are worth the Army's careful attention. Here are three reasons why.

1. Deterrence increasingly demands conventional-nuclear integration.

One need not subscribe to all of the 2018 NPR's conclusions to take seriously its assessment of the evolution of the threat environment since the last NPR in 2010. Modernization of China's and Russia's conventional forces have eroded U.S. advantages in potential regional conflict scenarios, while the same competitors have simultaneously modernized their nuclear forces. Russia and China could increasingly see their nuclear capabilities not only as an existential deterrent, as their declaratory policies emphasize, but as a coercive tool for prevailing in a regional conventional conflict. Moreover, as recent newspaper headlines make plain, North Korea's maturing nuclear capabilities are now decisively reshaping notions of deterrence on the Korean peninsula.

One implication of these trends is the need for the United States and its allies to think more holistically about deterrence of limited regional aggression. With potential adversaries strengthening their own nuclear deterrents, segregation of U.S. planning efforts between nuclear and conventional capabilities is no longer adequate. The new NPR directs that:

U.S. forces will ensure their ability to integrate nuclear and non-nuclear military planning and operations. Combatant Commands and Service components will be organized and resourced for this mission, and will plan, train, and exercise to integrate U.S. nuclear and non-nuclear forces and operate in the face of adversary nuclear threats and attacks.⁴

This imperative is not born of a desire to make nuclear warfighting more feasible, per se. But it is based on the reasonable premise that credible deterrence depends in some measure on visibly

realistic warfighting capabilities. In this way, the NPR points toward the future of planning for the entire Joint Force and thus demands the Army's full attention.

2. The Army may need to fight on a nuclear battlefield.

This point follows directly from the previous one. As stated, the goal of improved conventional-nuclear integration is to buttress deterrence, not to prepare for nuclear warfighting. However, if the NPR's premise is correct, that in extreme scenarios adversaries may see a benefit to limited nuclear use, then the likelihood of a U.S. ground maneuver force having to operate in the midst of such use is on the rise. This risk is central to Russia's imputed threats to use tactical nuclear weapons to stave off conventional defeat or escalation by the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO). Also, in the most dire scenarios of war in Korea, it is easy to imagine a nuclear attack on U.S. Army forces, either preemptively or as the last resort of a toppling regime.

While these scenarios remain relatively unlikely, their growing risk suggests a need for a thorough assessment of the Army's capabilities for operating on a nuclear battlefield, including for defensive measures, detection and remediation, medical response, and related tactics, techniques, and procedures.⁵

3. There may be a future for land-based theater missiles.

The 1987 Intermediate-Range Nuclear Forces Treaty (INF) between the United States and the Soviet Union instituted a bilateral ban on ground-launched missiles with ranges from 500-5,500 kilometers. This treaty brought down the curtain on the Army's last nuclear missile, the Pershing II. Thirty years later, the INF Treaty's future looks very uncertain. The United States has publicly accused Russia of violating the treaty by developing and deploying a new ground-launched cruise missile in the prohibited range, and Russia has replied with dubious counter-accusations of U.S. violations.⁶

The NPR makes clear that U.S. responses to Russia's violations will remain treaty compliant, and that its policy goal is for Russia to return to compliance, itself.⁷ Nevertheless, if Russia does ultimately abrogate the treaty, officially or otherwise, land-based theater missile forces could again become a consideration for the U.S. military. The most recent *National Defense Authorization Act* directed the Department of Defense to initiate (treaty-compliant) research and development on an intermediate-range ground-launched cruise missile.⁸ In keeping with that directive, senior serving and former defense officials have advocated further consideration of developing such capabilities.⁹ New intermediate-range missiles need not be nuclear-capable, of course, and the Army could conceivably play a major role in fielding new conventional missiles in this range, regardless of whether new nuclear forces are pursued.¹⁰

Naturally, there are many other reasons for the Army to give the NPR close study, including the simple fact that nuclear modernization will compete for resources. This may affect not only Army modernization priorities, but also readiness in the Army and across the joint force. But the Army should also look beyond the NPR's implications for program trade-offs, and the three points highlighted here offer strategic grist for Army leaders' debate and deliberation.

ENDNOTES

1. Office of the Secretary of Defense, *Nuclear Posture Review*, Washington, DC: Office of the Secretary of Defense, February 2018. For discussion of new low-yield weapons, see pp. 52-55. For discussion of circumstances of use, see p. 21.

2. For example, see Stephen M. Walt, "The World Doesn't Need Any More Nuclear Strategies," *Foreign Policy*, February 6, 2018; Joe Cirincione, "Nuclear Nuts: Trump's New Policy Hypes the Threat and Brings Us Closer to War," *Defense One*, February 2, 2018, available from <http://www.defenseone.com/ideas/2018/02/trumps-new-nuclear-policy-hypes-threat-and-bring-war-nearer/145703/>; and Mark Perry, "Trump's Nuke Plan Raising Alarms Among Military Brass," *The American Conservative*, February 2, 2018.

3. For example, see Office of the Secretary of Defense, p. 52; Matthew Kroenig, "The Case for Tactical U.S. Nukes," *The Wall Street Journal*, January 24, 2018; Matthew Costlow, "Big Fears of Small Nukes Overblown," *Breaking Defense*, January 23, 2018, available from <https://breakingdefense.com/2018/01/big-fears-of-small-nukes-overblown/>; Vincent Manzo, "Give the Low-Yield SLBM its Day in Court," *Defense One*, January 22, 2018, available from <http://www.defenseone.com/ideas/2018/01/give-low-yield-slbm-its-day-court/145397/>; and John R. Harvey, Franklin C. Miller, Keith B. Payne, and Bradley H. Roberts, "Continuity and Change in U.S. Nuclear Policy," *Real Clear Defense*, February 7, 2018.

4. Office of the Secretary of Defense, p. 21.

5. See Richard Hart Sinnreich, "Recovering the Army's Nuclear Battlefield Proficiency," Association of the United States Army, February 12, 2015, available from <https://www.USA.org/articles/recovering-army%E2%80%99s-nuclear-battlefield-proficiency>.

6. For useful summaries, see Ankit Panda, "Backgrounder: The Uncertain Future of the INF Treaty," Council on Foreign Relations, December 21, 2017, available from <https://www.cfr.org/backgrounder/uncertain-future-inf-treaty>; and Steven Pifer, "The Death of the INF Treaty Could Signal a U.S.-Russia Missile Race," *The National Interest*, December 6, 2017. Also see Kevin Ryan, "After the INF Treaty: An Objective Look at US and Russian Compliance, Plus a New Arms Control Regime," *Russia Matters*, December 7, 2017, available from <https://www.russiamatters.org/analysis/after-inf-treaty-objective-look-us-and-russian-compliance-plus-new-arms-control-regime>; and Ian Anthony, "European Security after the INF Treaty," *Survival*, Vol. 59, No. 6, December 2017-January 2018.

7. Office of the Secretary of Defense, pp. 10, 74.

8. House of Representatives Report 115-404, *National Defense Authorization Act for Fiscal Year 2018 Conference Report*, Title XII, Subtitle E, Washington, DC: U.S. House of Representatives, November 9, 2017.

9. For example, see Admiral Harry Harris, Testimony before the Senate Armed Services Committee, April 27, 2017; and Evelyn Farkas, Testimony before the House Armed Services Committee, February 10, 2016.

10. See Jacob Heim, *Missiles for Asia? The Need for Operational Analysis of U.S. Theater Ballistic Missiles in the Pacific*, Santa Monica, CA: RAND Corporation, 2016; and Jim Thomas, "Why the U.S. Army Needs Missiles: A New Mission to Save the Service," *Foreign Affairs*, Vol. 92, No. 3, May/June 2013.

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