

# The Nuclear Posture Review Must Account for a Growing Chinese Nuclear Threat

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## KEY TAKEAWAYS

The Nuclear Posture Review is a vital tool that provides the administration the opportunity to align U.S. policy, capabilities, and posture with current threats.

Since the 2018 NPR, the threat environment has deteriorated substantially, primarily due to China's and Russia's expansion of advanced nuclear weapons systems.

The new NPR should focus on modernization efforts and properly aligning nuclear policy and capabilities with current threats, not meeting political promises.

Officials state the Biden Administration's Nuclear Posture Review (NPR) will be ready for release soon.<sup>1</sup> The NPR provides the Administration the opportunity to align policy, capabilities, and posture with the current global threat environment. The only real insight into this Administration's views on nuclear policy was provided in President Joe Biden's Interim National Security Strategic Guidance, which described a goal of "reducing the role of nuclear weapons in U.S. national security strategy." It is likely the Administration will seek to carry that theme forward into the NPR.<sup>2</sup>

Yet even since Biden took office, the threat environment has markedly deteriorated, with the revelations of China's strategic nuclear breakout—a change not accounted for in the Trump Administration's 2018 NPR—and Russia's continued nuclear

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expansion.<sup>3</sup> If, as has been advertised, the NPR is to truly be “informed by the current and projected global security environment,” these new developments should logically lead the Administration to conclude it needs at least the nuclear programs proposed in the previous NPR—and quite possibly more.<sup>4</sup>

## The Growing Nuclear Threat

The nuclear threat environment has considerably worsened since the 2018 NPR.

- Most significantly, analysts have discovered that China is building over 300 new missile silos capable of carrying intercontinental ballistic missiles (ICBMs) that can hold multiple warheads each, and the Pentagon’s 2021 China Military Power Report revealed that China is on its way to becoming a nuclear peer to the United States and Russia, as it might have at least 1,000 nuclear weapons by the end of the decade.<sup>5</sup> For the first time in its history, the United States will have to face two peer nuclear competitors at once.
- China has improved its arsenal of medium- to intermediate-range dual-capable missiles capable of striking U.S. assets in the Indo-Pacific region. It has also tested nuclear-capable hypersonic missiles, including one that orbited the globe before reentering the atmosphere to glide to its target.<sup>6</sup>
- Russia has tested and begun to deploy multiple types of hypersonic nuclear weapons, in addition to new exotic capabilities such as a nuclear-powered cruise missile. It also continues to grow its stockpile of non-strategic nuclear weapons, which are not constrained by the New Strategic Arms Reduction Treaty.<sup>7</sup>

Bottom line, the United States is facing an unprecedented nuclear threat from two major powers and will need to ensure its nuclear posture can evolve to ensure strong nuclear deterrence.

## An Objective NPR Reflective of the Growing Nuclear Threat

An NPR to best posture the United States to maintain a strong national security against the rising nuclear threats would:

**Depart from the Goal of Reducing the Role of Nuclear Weapons in U.S. Strategy.** This goal may have had some basis during the comparatively more benign world of 2010, when President Barack Obama used nearly the exact same language in his NPR.<sup>8</sup> Today, this goal seems almost absurd given the current reality in which adversaries are assigning more prominence to their own nuclear forces. The revelations of China’s missile buildup and strategic breakout, which occurred just months after Biden released his interim strategic guidance, allow for a change in course. It is not uncommon for presidents to adjust agendas when confronted with unexpected changes. Biden’s NPR should shift from the original goal of reducing the role of nuclear weapons to one that prioritizes deterring the increasingly challenging threats of the future. In the face of a significant change in threat, such a shift would signal strong leadership.<sup>9</sup>

**Continue the Modernization Program Initiated by President Obama and Continued by President Donald Trump.** The United States is pursuing an overdue effort to upgrade its nuclear forces to include delivery systems, warheads, and the supporting infrastructure, all of which were built during the Cold War. Many capabilities, like the Minuteman III ICBMs, must be retired within years due to aging issues.

Any delay or cancelation in these programs would result in unilateral force reductions, providing an advantage to our adversaries as they increase their own forces. In the past, groups like Global Zero cited the improving global threat environment to justify their proposals to forgo nuclear modernization programs.<sup>10</sup> Since the threat has now gone in the opposite direction, the NPR should reject these proposals and continue to embrace modernization.

**Continue Pursuit of the Sea-Launched Cruise Missile-Nuclear (SLCM-N).** The Trump NPR proposed development of a SLCM-N to address a gap in our deterrent threat against Russia’s and China’s growing regional or non-strategic nuclear weapons. Currently, the United States has only a meager capability to threaten a proportional response to the limited employment of nuclear weapons in a regional conflict. This imbalance is extremely concerning as the prospect for conventional conflict to escalate to the nuclear level in both the European and Indo-Pacific theaters increases. It is critical the NPR continue SLCM-N development to improve nuclear deterrence at lower levels of the escalation ladder.<sup>11</sup>

**Consider the Need to Make Force Posture Adjustments Beyond the Current Modernization Program to Account for China’s Strategic Breakout.** The basic design of the current U.S. nuclear force posture, on which the modernization program is based, dates to around 2010, when

Russia was the only near-peer nuclear competitor and the overall nuclear threat environment was expected to lessen over time.<sup>12</sup> This assumption of a more benign threat environment impacted decisions about future nuclear force structure, such as the design for the *Columbia*-class nuclear submarine, which will have four fewer missile tubes than its predecessor, the *Ohio*-class, and therefore less firing capacity.<sup>13</sup>

With previous threat assumptions now invalidated by China's nuclear breakout and Russia's continued nuclear expansion, the NPR must reconsider whether the current modernization program will suffice to deter the growing threat for the decades to come and how plans should be revised to account for a more threatening future than was previously envisioned. At minimum, the NPR should examine how a significantly larger Chinese arsenal will affect deterrence requirements.

It should also begin to study how the size and composition of the nuclear force can be adjusted to improve our ability to hedge against an uncertain future. For instance, the Administration should consider questions including whether acquiring 12 *Columbia*-class submarines will be enough, the feasibility of uploading warheads held in reserve to the current force, and if the United States will eventually need to produce more than the required 80 plutonium pits per year.<sup>14</sup> While this NPR should not be expected to have final decisions made for future posture changes, it must begin the dialogue now, since any changes to the force will take time to implement.

**Maintain the Long-standing Nuclear Declaratory Policy of Calculated Ambiguity.** The NPR should reject any changes to declaratory policy, such as a “no first use,” “sole purpose,” or “existential threat” policy.<sup>15</sup> The current policy of ambiguity leaves nuclear weapons on the table for a growing range of strategic non-nuclear threats (such as chemical and biological weapons attacks), which forces adversaries to consider the risks of nuclear retaliation when contemplating such attacks.<sup>16</sup> As nuclear and non-nuclear threats increase, any changes that would reduce options for deterrence would only unsettle U.S. allies and embolden adversaries.<sup>17</sup> For example, in the case of a Chinese incursion against Taiwan, former Japanese Minister of Defense Taro Kono, explains that “‘no first use’ draws a red line, and below the red line, anything goes. That’s the wrong message.”<sup>18</sup>

## Conclusion

A strong NPR will be one that focuses on aligning nuclear policy, posture, and capabilities with the current and future threats facing the United States, not on meeting any political promises. To prepare the United States

for a future in which it must deter two nuclear peer competitors, the NPR should at minimum continue ongoing modernization efforts and maintain current declaratory policy, while considering any needed changes to U.S. force posture.

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