

The Obama Administration's Nuclear Posture Review (NPR): Analysis and Evaluation

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Introduction

After a year of deliberation, on April 6th the Obama administration announced its Nuclear Posture Review (NPR). The new NPR not only indicates the future direction and guidelines of the US nuclear policy for the next 5-10 years, it also can exert enormous influence in maintaining the global non-proliferation regime, such as resolving the North Korean nuclear issue. This NPR lays the groundwork for a new threat awareness that, while the danger of nuclear war between countries such as the previous US/Soviet Cold War conflict has significantly declined, the threat of nuclear terrorism is on the rise. At the same time, while steering towards President Obama's vision for "a world without nuclear weapons" as an ultimate goal, it takes the position that the role of nuclear weapons must be reduced.

This most recently announced NPR delivers the following 5 points as the core of the new nuclear policy: ① prevent nuclear proliferation and nuclear terrorism, ② reduce the role of nuclear weapons in US security strategy, ③ maintain strategic deterrent capability and security while reducing the nuclear armament, ④ strengthen regional deterrent capability and keep allies and partners secure, ⑤ keep a safe, well-maintained, and effective nuclear force. The fact that preventing nuclear terror is set as the first goal reflects how deeply concerned the Obama administration is about the possibility of nuclear terrorism.

Regarding the North Korean nuclear issue and the US/ROK alliance, our major interest lies with the 2nd item, that is, the part about reducing the role of nuclear weapons. The NPR establishes that the "fundamental role" of its nuclear weapons is to deter nuclear attacks against the US and its allies, and amends the existing Negative Security Assurance (NSA) to clarify a new, strengthened NSA strategy: "The United States will not use or threaten to use nuclear weapons against non-nuclear

weapons states that are party to the NPT and in compliance with their nuclear nonproliferation obligations.”

Previous Negative Security Assurance Policy: Conditional NSA

The first time a US administration publicly announced an NSA policy was in 1978 during the Carter administration, in a speech by then-Secretary of State Cyrus Vance at the UN Special Conference on Disarmament. In this speech, Secretary of State Vance stated that “the United States will not use nuclear weapons against any non-nuclear-weapon state party to the NPT or any comparable internationally binding commitment not to acquire nuclear explosive devices,” however, an exception could be made “in the case of an attack on the United States...or its allies, by any state allied to a nuclear-weapon state or associated with a nuclear-weapon state.”

It is because of this exception that the pre-existing NSA has been called a “conditional NSA.” Taking the example of the Korean peninsula, the key effect of the “conditional NSA” is that even if North Korea were to join the NPT and faithfully follow international norms, the US could still retaliate against it with nuclear weapons if it attacked the US or invaded South Korea. This condition, as a strategic link backing up America’s pledge of a “nuclear umbrella” for South Korea, served an important guarantee to deter North Korea from invading the South. In other words, by leaving open the option of nuclear retaliation against North Korea (whether it develops nuclear arms or not) in the event that it were to invade the South with conventional weapons, as it did at the start of the Korean War, this maximized the deterrent effect and discouraged the North from making military provocations.

In 1995, after the US slightly modified the existing NSA while maintaining its core principles, it announced to the UN that “the United States will not use nuclear weapons against non-nuclear-weapon states party to the NPT except in the case of an invasion or any other attack on the United States, its territories, its armed forces or other troops, its allies, or on a State towards which it has a security commitment, carried out or sustained by such a non-nuclear-weapon State in association or alliance with a nuclear weapon State.” The conditional NSA has been established as an international norm to the extent that, among the other four permanent members of the UN Security Council which are also acknowledged as nuclear powers under the NPT (England, France, Russia, and China), all but China have imitated the American position almost identically.



A New Negative Security Policy

A major feature of the new NSA described by Obama's NPR is that it has eliminated conditions which left open the option of nuclear retaliation. As long as non-nuclear states join the NPT and faithfully carry out their obligations, even if they attack the US or its allies with chemical or biological weapons –to say nothing of conventional weapons – the US clearly declares that it will not retaliate with nuclear weapons. In other words, as opposed to the past when the option was left open for nuclear retaliation against North Korea in the event of an invasion of the South, from now on, if North Korea joins the NPT, abandons its nuclear weapons, and sincerely follows its non-proliferation obligations, the US cannot use nuclear weapons to repel a North Korean invasion.

The Obama administration does not disguise the fact that the new policy of “no nuclear retaliation” against non-nuclear NPT member states is targeted at North Korea. At a foreign press conference, Principal Deputy Under-Secretary of Defense James Miller explained that one reason for the new policy was to entice North Korea to give up its nukes and return to the NPT. Of course, the new policy does not apply to North Korea, which currently possesses nuclear weapons. Secretary of State Clinton has said that North Korea has 1~6 such weapons, and Secretary of Defense Gates has declared that if North Korea continues with its nuclear proliferation in violation of international norms, he will consider all possible measures in dealing with them. The general assumption is that “all possible measures” includes the use of nuclear weapons.

In effect the new Obama NSA has raised the topic of America's nuclear threat, and it can be considered a calculated strategy to target “outliers” of the nuclear non-proliferation system such as North Korea which rationalize their nuclear programs, eliminate their justification for nuclear development, and lure them back to joining the NPT. As compared to the Bush administration's “rogue states,” the Obama administration's use of the term “outliers” is in itself suggestive of states which have fallen away from the nuclear non-proliferation system, and carries a message of inviting them to return to it.

Evaluations of Obama's NPR

Regarding this new NPR, which emerged from the idea that we must obstruct nuclear proliferation by removing the justification of outliers like North Korea for nuclear development, critical views have already begun to be aired by both by government insiders and the American public. For



example, critics suggest that the conditions under which nukes cannot be used are too specific; that it damages the element of “strategic ambiguity” which deters America’s enemies from using armed force; that it is irrational to proscribe America’s use of nuclear weapons even if the US mainland suffers massive casualties from a nuclear or biological attack; and that one cannot expect that North Korea and Iran will stop their nuclear programs just because the US promises not to make any nuclear threats.

The initial response from North Korea, too, has been negative. On April 9, a Foreign Ministry spokesperson pointed out that the new NPR leaves North Korea and Iran as targets for nuclear retaliation and complained that it is no different from the hostile policy of the early Bush administration, which set North Korea as a target of nuclear preemptive strike and habitually made nuclear threats. At the same time, the spokesperson criticized the new NPR for completely overturning the pledge made in the 9/19 Joint Declaration not to use nuclear weapons and for throwing cold water on the prospect of re-opening the 6-party talks, and declared that the North will continue to increase and modernize its nuclear stockpile as much as it deems necessary.

It is unclear whether Obama’s new NSA will be able to entice North Korea to denuclearize. Looking at it from the angle of South Korean security, we must note that since the outbreak of the North Korean nuclear crisis there have been fears that the US nuclear umbrella has weakened. We must recognize that the North Korean government’s argument that it must develop nuclear weapons due to the nuclear threat from the US is gaining credibility. Since the North Korean nuclear issue emerged in the early 1990s, North Korea has persistently attacked the US’ attempts to stop its nuclear development using this “US threat argument,” and it can claim to have earned some measure of success.

For example, after the Korean War the North used the nuclear issue as a decoy to achieve the first US-North Korea high-level talks, and in the June 11, 1993 Joint Declaration the US formally pledged not to use or threaten to use armed force, including nuclear weapons, against North Korea. The Geneva Agreed Framework signed on October 21, 1994, included an item stating “The U.S. will provide formal assurances to the DPRK, against the threat or use of nuclear weapons by the U.S.” The 9/19 Joint Declaration agreed upon at the 4th round of the 6-party talks in 2005 included the statement “The United States affirmed that it has no nuclear weapons on the Korean Peninsula and has no intention to attack or invade the DPRK with nuclear or conventional weapons.”

North Korea has used “abandonment of nuclear programs” as bait many times to extract promises from the US not to use nuclear or conventional weapons, and now it is using abandonment of



nuclear weapons as a pretext for insisting on the signing of a peace treaty, attempting to neutralize the armistice agreement which forms the foundation of the restraints against the DPRK. This is the reality of the situation we are facing today in the ongoing North Korean nuclear issue. Obama's new NPR presents South Korea with important security challenges, and it will require wisdom and strategy to resolve them sensibly.

