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NUCLEAR POSTURE REVIEW 2018: TRANSATLANTIC LINK IN THE TIMES OF UNCERTAINTY

United States of America for years have played an important role of the arbiter and guarantor of international stability. With Barack Obama's policy US were as close to the European way of thinking as never before. Things have got changed with the newly elected president Donald Trump. His statements during the election campaign were threatening and provoking international community. His policy as a president should be primary analyzed not through twitter posts or provocative statements but substantial state documents. Nuclear posture review is one of such key documents and most significant in the field of nuclear strategy. Created by experts of the current administration it intends to deeply analyze recent developments and address major threats. It is done in line with presidential thinking, including uncertainty thinking, but also giving credits to European partners and considering their fundamental needs.

Keywords: NPR, nuclear strategy, nuclear deterrence, transatlantic, security, USA, Europe

Introduction

For decades transatlantic link between Europe and United States (US) has been ensuring a stable and secure environment for the region. Priorities kept changing but this strong cooperation was true for both Cold and post-Cold war times. Lately, new security challenges appeared on the agenda, including Russian violation of international law, North Korean missile tests, elections in US, Brexit and others. These events and processes are of a different nature but have a common effect of reducing security and trust into a possible united response by transatlantic partners.

Importance of unity is seen as a crucial element in generating an adequate response and is difficult to achieve between so many partners with different priorities, capabilities and strategies. But whether to agree to not agree is another tactical option in this case?

This paper will focus on the following research questions: How has changed US nuclear strategy and what is European role in this transatlantic security partnership?

Recently published US Nuclear Posture Review (NPR) reveals and categorises main common threats for transatlantic partners, informs the adversaries about readiness to act and build-up of capabilities, as well as shows strong commitment to allies. At the same time, many important details on the means and cases of utilization of one response or another stay blurred in order to preserve certainty/uncertainty balance and European partners play a crucial role in this play.

For the better understanding of current trends and developments in the area, the author uses document analysis of the NPR 2018 in comparison with previous NPR 2010 and combination with general political analysis of the international environment.

NPR 2018 overview

As a non-classified strategy document produced by a unilateral actor, NPR is primarily aimed to inform US adversaries and allies, with additional objectives of systematisation and projection.

The overall tone of the NPR 2018 is more competitive with much higher attention given to the concept of deterrence and the main message being 'US have strong capabilities and will use them if necessary, to protect its territory and Allies'. Reflected change of the international security environment is seen already by a quantitative comparison of key words and concepts in the NPR 2018 and NPR 2010.

As described in the respective parts of the review 2018, special attention is now given to the Great Power competition with Russia and China. And if attention given to Russia was also high at the NPR 2010, China's profile has risen almost twice. Meanwhile, it is worth mentioning that the very attitude and context of mentioning these states have been changed dramatically from "strategic stability" and "high-level

dialogues” to “Great Power competition” and “preven[tion of a] Great Power war”¹²³⁴.

North Korea’s (DPRK) and Iran’s profiles have also significantly increased their importance while staying in line with a previous rhetoric. The very fact of continuity on the issues related to Iran is questionable due to a number of events and significant progress made on the settlement of the Iranian case, including the key role of the European Union (EU) as a mediator in an agreed Iranian nuclear deal in 2015⁵. This agreement was questioned by Trump on a number of occasions and compromised formula expressed at the NPR that points attention to the fact that agreement itself is temporary, till 2031, and intentions of Iran stay rather unclear⁶⁷. The same year appears at the document also in a context of the sea-based deterrent force modernization program that is considered as one of the equally “essential [leg] to overall effectiveness” of the Triad (present in both Obama and Bush NPRs)⁸⁹¹⁰.

Chosen modernization program, including “replacement ICBM, bomber, smaller warhead for the D-5 and replacement submarines, and modern command and control” is seen by P. Bracken as part of “signalling by the United States” maintaining a balance between “action and restraint” as a reaction to the analysed behaviour of the adversaries¹¹. These smaller arms or low-yield weapons with possible launch from a submarine became one of the hottest topics. With initial attempt to make US response more flexible and mirror developments in Russia, this proposal is criticised for the lowering the nuclear threshold¹².

Such behaviour had a direct impact on European security, as in case of incorporation of “escalate to de-escalate” doctrine by Russia and followed threatening to use nuclear weapons (NW) during the occupation of Crimea campaign¹³¹⁴¹⁵. With the main difference in fundamental understanding of war as ‘operationalised’ by Russia – as “the extension of policy by other means” and ‘contingent’ by European states – “dictated by fear misperception and accident” that further created hope that no reaction will follow on Russian actions¹⁶. NPR 2018 in this regard numerously underlines irresponsiveness of this approach and readiness of the US to respond with no “no first use”¹⁷.

A similar stand is taken on non-proliferation and arms control that the US is committed to the idea itself but is not ready to risk its security. Interestingly enough draft formulation that “America’s strategic competitors have not followed example” disappeared at the final version and a number of one-type phrases on the importance of US security guarantees were inserted. That nevertheless didn’t increase the quantity of non-proliferation rhetoric high enough to reach 2010 level. No continuity in the question of one-warhead policy launched by Obama and no commitment to NW test ban ratification. Open sea targeting is the only initiative kept but the very idea of such targeting was criticised already during previous administration because of automatic re-targeting that takes a few seconds in case of a launch.

¹ *Nuclear Posture Review Report* (2010). Department of Defence USA, 26.

² *Nuclear Posture Review Report* (2010). Department of Defence USA, 68.

³ *Nuclear Posture Review Report* (2018). Department of Defence USA, 6.

⁴ *Nuclear Posture Review Report* (2018). Department of Defence USA, 12.

⁵ See Iran nuclear deal: EU statement on the JCPA. *Official website of the European Council*. <<https://www.consilium.europa.eu/en/european-council/>>.

⁶ See Iran nuclear deal: sanctions waived as Trump begins countdown to keep US. *Guardian*. <<https://www.theguardian.com/>>.

⁷ *Nuclear Posture Review Report* (2018). Department of Defence USA, 37.

⁸ *Nuclear Posture Review Report* (2018). Department of Defence USA, 67.

⁹ *Nuclear Posture Review Report* (2010). Department of Defence USA, 43.

¹⁰ *Excerpts of classified NPR* (2001). Congress, 1.

¹¹ Bracken P. (2018). The 2018 Nuclear Posture Review: Signaling Restraint with Stipulations. <<https://www.fpri.org/article/2018/02/2018-nuclear-posture-review-signaling-restraint-stipulations/>>.

¹² See Mount, A., Stowe-Thurston, A. (2018). What is US nuclear policy, exactly? *Bulletin of the atomic scientist*. <<https://thebulletin.org/2018/04/what-is-us-nuclear-policy-exactly/>>.

¹³ *Nuclear Posture Review Report* (2018). Department of Defence USA, 54.

¹⁴ Sokov, N. (2014). Why Russia calls a limited nuclear strike “de-escalation”. *Bulletin of the atomic scientist*. <<https://thebulletin.org/2014/03/why-russia-calls-a-limited-nuclear-strike-de-escalation/>>.

¹⁵ See Russia threatens to use ‘nuclear force’ over Crimea and the Baltic states (2015). *Independent*. <<https://www.independent.co.uk/news/world/europe/russia-threatens-to-use-nuclear-force-over-crimea-and-the-baltic-states-10150565.html>>.

¹⁶ Corbett, A. (2016). Deterring a nuclear Russia in a 21st century: theory and practice. *NDC Research Report*.

¹⁷ *Nuclear Posture Review Report* (2018). Department of Defence USA, 46.

On the other side, the issue of power balance with Russia and high importance of strength for the dialogue with Russia was correctly caught as show early responses from Russia stating that after US progress in non-strategic NW it “will be able to discuss on equal footing” all concerns¹. Recent claims of North Korea’s readiness to hold denuclearisation talks also prove a range of possibilities that opened US administration’s approach.

The main achievement of the current US administration is a clear identification of adversaries and explanation of the reasoning behind changes. As credible assurances to the partners and allies require credible deterrence capabilities and informed adversaries at first place. Meanwhile, this approach might create some complexities for further cooperation in the non-proliferation efforts in the viewable future.

Certainty and uncertainty balance.

In the previous part, we’ve briefly touched upon the high importance of information function of the strategy. But to inform doesn’t necessarily mean to clarify. In such a sensitive question as nuclear deterrence, there should be always kept a balance between certainty and uncertainty in order to inform the adversary of all three components: arms, technical abilities and political readiness to use them as well as effective signalling adversaries; meanwhile not giving up all the details of war tactics. There are two possible solutions to this dilemma, both used by transatlantic partners. As B. Tertrais mentions, “Washington and London are clear about the circumstances that would constitute a particular threshold (WMD use), but unclear about the circumstances that would constitute a particular response; Paris is vague about the exact threshold (‘vital interests’), but clear about the response”².

In this sense, NPR 2018 follows usual for the US track of listing main cases that would be considered as “extreme circumstance”³ and gives even more uncertainty by introducing an approach of “no ‘one size fits all’ for deterrence”⁴.

At the 2018 report, these extreme circumstances are broadened to the “terrorist nuclear attack against the United States or its allies and partners”⁵, in line with Trump’s priority given to international terrorism as a number one threat to security.

Worth mentioning, that previously there were no generally recognized cases of nuclear terrorism that corresponds to the character of modern international terrorism. Nevertheless, non-recognised nuclear states, as North Korea might if future considers sharing information and technologies itself not only with other states, but also terroristic groups. By supplementing existing clause of “hold fully accountable any state, terrorist group, or other non-state actor that supports or enables terrorist efforts to obtain or employ nuclear devices”⁶⁷ with the mentioned-above novation, Trump’s administration is trying to inform other actors that even indirect participation in such act would be detected (origin of the enriched material and technologies) and those responsible will be punished by decided means, that could include “the ultimate form of retaliation”⁸.

Two other newly incorporated components component of “extreme circumstances” are “limited nuclear escalation” and “non-nuclear strategic attack” (including versus “U.S., allied, or partner civilian population or infrastructure, and attacks on U.S. or allied nuclear forces, their command and control, or warning and attack assessment capabilities”)⁹.

In order to avoid direct application of these clauses an “ultimate form of retaliation” is not specified. And in the blocks of NW application authors talk about “vital interests”, leaving a place for manoeuvring by not linking blocks together. And “tailored deterrence [‘no one size fits all’] strategies communicate to different potential adversaries that their aggression would carry unacceptable risks and intolerable costs

¹ Баклицкий, А. (2018). Жесткая сила: как Трамп покончил с «ядерным либерализмом» Обамы. *РБК*. <<https://www.rbc.ru/opinions/politics/15/01/2018/5a5c91679a7947598db1212a>>.

² Tertrais, B. (2007). A comparison between US, UK and French nuclear policies and doctrines. *CERI*. <https://www.sciencespo.fr/cei/sites/sciencespo.fr.cei/files/art_bt.pdf>.

³ *Nuclear Posture Review Report* (2018). Department of Defence USA, 45.

⁴ *Nuclear Posture Review Report* (2018). Department of Defence USA, 50.

⁵ *Nuclear Posture Review Report* (2018). Department of Defence USA, 22.

⁶ *Nuclear Posture Review Report* (2018). Department of Defence USA, 13.

⁷ *Nuclear Posture Review Report* (2018). Department of Defence USA, 22.

⁸ *Nuclear Posture Review Report* (2018). Department of Defence USA, 22.

⁹ *Nuclear Posture Review Report* (2018). Department of Defence USA, 45.

according to their particular calculations of risk and cost”, keeping in mind that for Russia and China this might (but not necessarily will) lead to the ‘Great Power war’, when in the case of DPRK or Iran rivalry is rather asymmetric¹. In practice, differentiation occurs even inside of the sub-groups. The same US president who rejected the Iranian deal yesterday has taken attempts to progress on the North Korean track today. This play around non-proliferation efforts is explained by a number of factors including domestic revisionist strategy of all the Obama’s policies and international support line to Saudi Arabia.

Trump has shown his loyalty to the uncertainty already during the election campaign. As a President, he supports such measures taken to show that even risk minor than the global war threat to the West would be met responded with unacceptable damage and only option proposed to prevent adversaries from checking set-up redlines is enhanced asset of uncertainty tactics.

Europe as a partner

Talking about extended deterrence, NPR 2018 states “potential adversaries, should not doubt our extended deterrence commitments or our ability and willingness to fulfil them” and the idea of assuring allies and partners goes through all the document². Meanwhile, mentioning of partners along with allies was changed in a few cases from draft to final version, probably also reflecting “no one-fits-all” strategy and keeping the final say for Washington.

Current scenario of division of labour is not absolutely new but rather echoes “the Cold war, when one purpose of conventional NATO forces were to rise a threshold of nuclear use”, as strong conventional European/NATO forces ready to respond and backed by ‘nuclear umbrella’ create fewer incentives for an adversary to start a war or play asymmetric games³.

Such roles sharing is based on different strategic approaches to deterrence by the actors. As A. Corbett mentions: “The Russian perspective on the use of nuclear capabilities is based on the ‘deterrence by denial’ concept ...[when] NATO considers nuclear deterrence in terms of ‘deterrence by punishment’... [and] this difference... creates the risk of a range of negative strategic outcomes for the Alliance”⁴. US NPR 2018 is trying to breach this gap by strengthened “integration of nuclear and non-nuclear military planning” and balance political function of NW with military credibility⁵. As to US own conventional capabilities, NPR 2018 is very opposite to NPR 2010 with an idea of future replacement of NW’s role by precision-guided munitions and express a rather sceptical short position. Another highly disputable with Moscow issue of the ballistic missile defence is also overshadowed.

In the European context, NPR envisages “a replacement for the current aging DCA” by the F-35A with B61-12 gravity bombs as part of the ‘dual-key’ nuclear sharing arrangements in order to strengthen practical capabilities⁶. Talking about NW NPR mentions: “U.S. and other NATO non-strategic nuclear forces deployed in Europe” as an element of common deterrence that might leave a room for European partners to develop further inside arrangements as those discussed between France and Germany⁸.

Another important pillar of European input is done by independent nuclear capacities of UK and France. In this regard NPR 2010 is silent, but 2018 is following the line agreed on NATO Warsaw summit, stresses their importance and independent nature of decision-making. In line with uncertainty strategy “Allies’ independent centres of decision-making contribute to deterrence by complicating the calculations of potential adversaries”¹⁰.

Finally, the financial side of such doubled approach (both nuclear and conventional deterrence in Europe) has always been high on the agenda. The Current situation is not an exception. During

¹ *Nuclear Posture Review Report* (2018). Department of Defence USA, 14.

² *Nuclear Posture Review Report* (2018). Department of Defence USA, 35.

³ Corbett, A. (2016). Deterring a nuclear Russia in a 21st century: theory and practice. *NDC Research Report*, 4.

⁴ Corbett, A. (2016). Deterring a nuclear Russia in a 21st century: theory and practice. *NDC Research Report*, 3-4, 6.

⁵ *Nuclear Posture Review Report* (2018). Department of Defence USA, 14.

⁶ *Nuclear Posture Review Report* (2018). Department of Defence USA, 74.

⁷ See Kamp, Karl-Heinz (2018). Nuclear Reorientation of NATO. *NDS Commentary*.

<https://www.nato.int/cps/en/natohq/news_162996.htm>.

⁸ *Nuclear Posture Review Report* (2018). Department of Defence USA, 55.

⁹ See Meier, O. (2016). Germany and the Role of Nuclear Weapons. <https://www.ssoar.info/ssoar/bitstream/handle/document/45909/ssoar-2016-meier-Germany_and_the_role_of.pdf?sequence=1>.

¹⁰ Warsaw Summit Communiqué NATO. *NATO website*. <https://www.nato.int/cps/en/natohq/official_texts_133169.htm>.

the election campaign, President Trump was highly critical of the question of burden sharing and even Obama was pushing European partners to reach 2% spending minimum. But according to the previous arrangements, these two percent must be also complemented by 20% of spending on the equipment and many countries have well-progressed on this criterion from 2014¹.

Furthermore, foreseen long ago at the treaties and finally adopted at the EU framework PESCO also focuses on both these aspects and aims at harmonization of budget spending among members². These newest European security developments have finally materialized by the end of 2017 with 23 member states on board. The idea of joint capabilities to achieve ‘strategic autonomy’ is based on three components: PESCO, CARD and EDF and already includes 17 adopted projects³. Aside from PESCO itself, it includes CARD – assessment system and best-practice sharing in military planning on a voluntary basis; and EDF that supports PESCO and other projects with funding. At first, lots of attention was given to the concern of the duplication of NATO capabilities by the EU with recent developments. As we can see from the above-mentioned explanation it becomes clearly far from truth. Moreover, as H. Harrard noticed, it can’t be seen as a threat of NATO or US influence “as we are happy that EU is doing more on defense, plus many aspects of these projects stay hypothetical and waiting for 3-5-7 years of implementation” to see the outcome⁴.

While it cannot be considered as a common army and there is no reference to nuclear capabilities, these recent initiatives indicate a strong tendency towards self-sufficiency on the European continent. Complex analysis of the situation enables to see that burden sharing can’t be assessed only by formal criteria and European counterpart of Transatlantic relations is highly valuable for the stabilization of the environment. Only by coordination of all the forces, transatlantic partners will have a chance to respond to an asymmetrical and sometimes unpredictable behaviour of adversaries.

Conclusions

US Nuclear Posture Review is one of the most important strategic documents of the country that reveals security concerns and possible solutions to current challenges to the United States, its Allies, partners and the international community as such. NPR 2018 is created in general traditions of such documents but includes a number of crucial novelties that are typical to the current Presidential Administration.

A lot of attention is dedicated to the Great Power Competition and choice of possible way of informing adversaries about capabilities and readiness to use them in case of the crisis. For this reason, US is choosing one of the variations of the certainty/uncertainty balance with highly blurred lines and links between concretely identifies threats and what would be the response. Furthermore, this approach is accompanied with the differentiated approach and the closer link between conventional and nuclear capabilities.

Due to its geopolitical position and the key role in the international arena, Europe is facing all the spectrum of challenges listed at the NPR and developments on the European continent influence the US on the other side. Both nuclear and non-nuclear European member states NATO and EU contribute to the creation of this stability/instability balance and deterrence of the adversaries. Even such internal questions as arms modernisation and budget spending appear to affect general power balancing among the actors. The US is making its own input via ‘nuclear umbrella’ and close cooperation.

We live in a time of uncertainty and many questions are left open after NPR 2018 but as far as transatlantic security cooperation continues and partners rest reliable some other aspects may rest unveiled.

¹ NATO Defence Expenditure of NATO Countries (2010-2017) PR/CP(2017)111, 29 June/juin 2017. *NATO website*. <https://www.nato.int/cps/em/natohq/news_156770.htm>.

² See remarks by HR Federica Mogherini EEAS

³ See EEAS, Permanent Structured Cooperation (PESCO) – Factsheet Bruxelles, 05/03/2018. <[https://eeas.europa.eu/headquarters/headquarters-homepage_zh-hans/34226/Permanent%20Structured%20Cooperation%20\(PESCO\)%20-%20Factsheet](https://eeas.europa.eu/headquarters/headquarters-homepage_zh-hans/34226/Permanent%20Structured%20Cooperation%20(PESCO)%20-%20Factsheet)>.

⁴ Interview with Herry Harrard, Acting head of the Political Section at the US mission to the EU? During the Transatlantic Affairs Seminar at the U.S. Mission to the EU, 31.01.2018

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