



The United States National Defence Strategy

Dr. Stuti Banerjee *

After releasing its National Security Strategy (NSS) document 2017, in December, the Trump Administration placed before the US Congress the National Defence Strategy (NDS). It also released a declassified summary of the same to the public (19 January 2018)ⁱ and released the Nuclear Posture Review 2018 on 02 Februaryⁱⁱ. The release of the two documents gives an insight into understanding the current and future defence policy of the United States.

The National Defence Strategy

Titled, 'Sharpening the American Military's Competitive Edge' the NDS takes forward the policy as outlined in the NSS document. Secretary of Defence James. Mattis stated, "This strategy makes a clear-eyed appraisal of our security environment, with a keen eye on America's place in the world."ⁱⁱⁱ "The document acknowledges the new challenges faced by the United States in an increasingly complex global security environment which is characterised by overt challenges to the free and open international order. ***Inter-state strategic competition, not terrorism, is now the primary concern in U.S. national security.***"^{iv} It states that, "***The central challenge to U.S. prosperity and security is the re-emergence of long-term, strategic competition*** by what the National Security Strategy classifies as ***revisionist powers***. It is increasingly clear that China and Russia want to shape a world consistent with their authoritarian model—gaining veto authority over other nations' economic, diplomatic, and security decisions."^v The document clarified that China was leveraging its military modernisation and predatory economic policies along with its influence in the region to reorder the Indo-Pacific region to its own advantage. One of the claimed objectives of the NDS is to bring about transparency and non-aggression in the path of military modernisation of the two nations.

On Russia, the NDS states that the former superpower seeks veto authority over the political, economic and diplomatic relations of all nations on its periphery while destroying the North Atlantic Treaty Organisation (NATO). It also states that Russia wants to change the security and economic structures in Europe and the Middle East in its favour.

Apart from the challenge posed by the two revisionist powers, the NSD also mentions Iran and North Korea, two *rogue nations* that are destabilising their regions through their pursuit of nuclear weapons or sponsorship of terrorism. It also states that the threat of terrorists pursuing Weapons of Mass Destruction (WMD) remains a persistent problem.

The document calls on the United States to build a reliable defence force but one that through dynamic force employment, military postures and operations bring unpredictability to the adversaries' decision making. It talks of an integrated approach which includes all departments of the government while also talking about the modernisation of its key capabilities. While stressing the need to build on the nuclear triad, it has also laid emphasis on missile defence (in face of the North Korean threat) as well as investments in the space and cyber-space domain. While building a lethal force, the document has also acknowledges that mutually beneficial alliances and partnerships are crucial for providing a durable, asymmetric strategic advantage to the United States. In taking forward the President's views the strategy document states, "Our alliances and coalitions are built on free will and shared responsibilities. While we will unapologetically represent America's values and belief in democracy, we will not seek to impose our way of life by force."^{vi} On NATO, it calls on the member-states to fulfil their commitments to modernise their defence forces and increase spending. It also makes a commitment to Article Five of the agreement.

With regard to *the Indo-Pacific*, the priority is to build a 'free and fair' region that provides security and prosperity to all. The United States intends to achieve this goal, "With key countries in the region ... (by) bring(ing) together bilateral and multilateral security relationships to preserve the free and open international system."^{vii} The document also supports bolstering existing bilateral and multilateral partnerships. and/or developing new relationships in Africa, the Western hemisphere and the Middle East.

In keeping with the administration's stress on accountability, the document also talks about budget discipline and better management of finances. It states that it is no longer to the United States' advantage to develop the latest technology but it has to be integrated to the system quickly to make it effective.

The defence strategy is to build a modernised force that will be able to increase American influence across the world, strengthen partnerships and alliances and provide security at home to its citizens.

Nuclear Posture Review

In releasing the Nuclear Posture Review (NPR) 2018, President Trump stated, "Over the past decade, despite United States efforts to reduce the roles and numbers of nuclear weapons, other nuclear nations grew their stockpiles, increased the prominence of nuclear weapons in their security strategies, and—in some cases—pursued the development of new nuclear capabilities to threaten other nations. Meanwhile, successive United States administrations deferred much-needed modernization of our nuclear weapons, infrastructure, and delivery systems. The 2018 NPR addresses these challenges. It describes the roles nuclear weapons play in our national

security strategy.”^{viii} Secretary Mattis stated, “This review rests on a bedrock truth: nuclear weapons have and will continue to play a critical role in deterring nuclear attack and in preventing large-scale conventional warfare between nuclear-armed states for the foreseeable future.”^{ix} The NPR states, “Global threat conditions have worsened markedly since the most recent 2010 NPR, including increasingly explicit nuclear threats from potential adversaries. The United States now faces a more diverse and advanced nuclear-threat environment than ever before, with considerable dynamism in potential adversaries’ development and deployment programs for nuclear weapons and delivery systems.” In keeping a consistent critique, from the National Security Strategy (NSS) document to the NDS, of the actions of Russia and China, the NPR stated that these two countries have continued to add to their nuclear weapons while the United States has reduced its stockpiles. However, it adds that it does not **‘wish’** to regard the two countries as adversaries and the United States continues to seek stable relations with both. It wants to engage with both nations to not only have an enhanced understanding of each other’s nuclear postures but to also reduce the possibility of miscalculations and misinterpretations. It further takes the example of North Korea, which is continuing its illicit pursuit of nuclear weapons and missile defence in violation of the United Nations Security Council Resolutions. And also Iran, which it claims has agreed to **‘constrain’** its nuclear programme but continues to have the technological capability and capacity to develop a nuclear weapon within one year. To these the NPR adds other weapons -- such as chemical, biological, space, cyber and modern conventional -- and violent non- state actors as threats facing the United States.

The NPR states that the nuclear strategy and nuclear weapons are essential to nuclear deterrence policy and non-nuclear aggression. “The idea is to prevent any adversary from attacking the United States with nuclear attack of any scale. U.S. nuclear forces play the following critical roles in U.S. national security strategy. They contribute to the:

- › Deterrence of nuclear and non-nuclear attack- it is to point to the adversary that there is no possible benefit from non-nuclear aggression or limited nuclear escalation. Clearing any misconception on this aspect is important to maintain peace in Europe and East Asia. The United States will also make use of a tailored and flexible approach to deter its adversaries across the spectrum. To do so, the United States will sustain and replace its nuclear capabilities, modernize NC₃ (command, control and communication), and strengthen the integration of nuclear and non-nuclear military planning.
- › Assurance of allies and partners-The United States extended nuclear deterrence and will stand by these commitments. It further stated that these assurances have also contributed to United States non-proliferation goals.
- › Achievement of U.S. objectives if deterrence fails-The United States continued with its first use policy as the NPR stated that the country would consider the use of nuclear weapons in extreme circumstances to defend its vital interests as also the interests of its allies and partners.
- › Capacity to hedge against an uncertain future-According to the NPR, hedging strategies reduce threats and risks by reducing the potential adversaries’ confidence that they can gain an advantage through the expansion of their nuclear capabilities. ^x

Stress has been laid on sustaining and modernising the nuclear triad to achieve the above goals, especially on the need to build flexible responses. The need for a triad is to ensure the survivability of deterrence capabilities and to be able to hold at risk a number of targets against

the adversary. The United States is undertaking the upgradation of its missile programme. It is also incorporating nuclear capabilities in its forward deploying fighter planes in addition to the life extension programme of the B61 Bombers.

The NPR has also stated that the modernisation of weapons systems would also include non-strategic nuclear capabilities. It will enhance and maintain forward deployable aircrafts, modify its submarine launched ballistic missiles (SLBMs) to provide low yield options, and develop sea launched cruise missiles (SLCMs). The last two options would not require the United States to rely on a host nation to support its deterrence strategy. In addition to this near-term step, for the longer term the United States will pursue a nuclear-armed SLCM, leveraging existing technologies to help ensure its cost effectiveness. SLCM will provide a needed non-strategic regional presence, an assured response capability. This is to deter Russia's belief that limited nuclear first use, potentially including low-yield weapons, can provide it with any advantage and against its non-strategic nuclear arsenal.^{xi} The NPR also stresses on the need to rebuild a modern nuclear weapons infrastructure. It states that there is no margin left for the United States to not improve its physical weapons infrastructure to produce strategic material and component for the nuclear weapons systems. This would also include non-strategic nuclear capabilities. The NPR identifies these capabilities in all three services and the life extension programmes for selected weapons programmes.

To achieve the above goals the NPR states that the NC3 (nuclear command, control and communication) would need to be upgraded to suit the present strategic environment with multiple threats especially space and cyber space, the possibility of a limited nuclear escalation and the board diffusion of authority within the department. To ensure that the NC3 remains effective, the United States would undertake initiatives to protect the system from cyber threats and space-based threats while improving command and communication links.

With the rise of non-state actors and the threat that they pose to the United States, **nuclear terrorism** also finds prominence in the NPR. The threat of terrorists gaining access to nuclear materials or weapons has been envisaged for some time now. Countries including the United States have tried to find policies for safety of nuclear material and facilities as well as the proper management of waste to ensure that radioactive material does not reach terror groups. The United States will hold accountable any state, non-state actor or terror group that facilitates terrorist efforts to obtain nuclear devices. "Key U.S. efforts under this strategy include:

- › Securing nuclear weapons, materials, related technology, and knowledge to prevent their malicious use
- › Enhancing cooperation with allies, partners, and international institutions to combat nuclear terrorism
- › Deterring state support for nuclear terrorism through advanced forensics and attribution capabilities
- › Strengthening defenses against nuclear terrorism to protect the American people and U.S. interests at home and abroad
- › Enhancing preparedness to mitigate the effects of nuclear incidents"^{xii}

The NPR states that the United States will work with its allies and partners to secure nuclear weapons and material at their source. And a terrorist attack against the United States or its allies and partners could qualify as extreme circumstances which may warrant the ultimate retaliation. The United States has the nuclear forensic capabilities to identify the source of the material used in the nuclear device.

The United States has stressed that while it is undertaking modernisation of its nuclear weapons to counter the current and future threats that it is likely to face, it is committed to the goals of nuclear non-proliferation and arms control. It will continue its efforts to minimise the number of nuclear weapons states by maintaining a credible nuclear deterrence for its allies and partners; seek arms control agreements to enhance safety while strictly controlling weapons grade material and technology transfer. It will also work with nations to deny terrorists organisation access to material or technology. “Although the United States will not seek ratification of the Comprehensive Nuclear Test Ban Treaty, it will continue to support the Comprehensive Nuclear Test Ban Treaty Organization Preparatory Committee as well as the International Monitoring System and the International Data Center. The United States will not resume nuclear explosive testing unless necessary to ensure the safety and effectiveness of the U.S. nuclear arsenal, and calls on all states possessing nuclear weapons to declare or maintain a moratorium on nuclear testing.” With regard to the New START between Russia and the United States, the NPR states that the agreement will remain effective till February 2021 and, by mutual agreement, may be extended for five years (till 2026). However, it states that Russia has rebuffed efforts to follow the New START with another round of negotiated reductions in strategic and non- strategic nuclear forces.

Conclusion

Both the NDS and the NPR, as does the NSS, mention the re-emergence of power competition between the United States, Russia and China. The documents talk about Russia’s efforts to use its economic and diplomatic influence to change the security perspectives in its neighbourhood. It is using its powers to subvert the political processes in Georgia, Ukraine and Crimea. This along with its desire to modernise its nuclear arsenal is going to be a challenge for the United States’ security policy and military. On China, similarly, the view highlighted in the documents is that the country is using its military and economic policies to assert power over countries with a long term strategy in mind. It is also trying to displace the United States in the near future especially in the Indo-Pacific, and achieve global pre-eminence in the future. The NDS mentions the Indo-Pacific alliances and partnerships of the United States before the NATO which can be understood to be a hint of the importance the region is gaining within the United States, but one has to wait and see how NDS policies would be implemented on the ground to understand the importance of the Indo-Pacific in strategic terms to the United States.

The two documents released by the Department of Defence are to the point and the language used is to deter adversaries and inspire American citizens with their national security agenda. The documents point to the trajectory that the United States and the department of defence will follow under the current administration to achieve its national security in the future. The projections of the future areas of threats have a broad consensus in the administration and the defence community of the United States. Both documents have laid stress on the United States partnerships and alliances. They both call for strengthening and deepening existing partnerships while forging new ones to secure future influence in the strategic arena.

The United States military and its assets are deployed throughout the world. The documents have laid stress on the need to modernise the defence capabilities of the United States, conventional and nuclear, to be able to deliver on the promise of a flexible response against the adversary. The United States will not make end date announcements or limits of its mission to make it easy for the adversary to counter it. In both documents the training of personnel has been talked about as also the need to increase budget allocations for the military. The two documents have stated that the defence department will be transparent in its use of the budget and in some manner has justified the increased defence budget proposed by the administration. (President Trump sent Congress a proposed budget request of \$639.1 billion -- \$574.5 billion in the base budget and \$64.6 billion in the Overseas Contingency Operations (OCO) budget.)

In its modernisation aspects, new areas such as space and cyber capabilities have also been looked into, with the stress on developing technology and incorporating it into the system faster.

The NSS made a clear statement on the security challenges before the United States. The NDS and the NPR align with these views to present the means through which the country will address those challenges.

**Dr. Stuti Banerjee, Research Fellow, Indian Council of World Affairs, New Delhi.
Disclaimer: The views expressed are that of the Researcher and not of the Council.*

ⁱ The Summary of the National Defence Strategy 2018 is available at <https://www.defense.gov/Portals/1/Documents/pubs/2018-National-Defense-Strategy-Summary.pdf>

ⁱⁱ The Nuclear Posture Review 2018 is available at <https://media.defense.gov/2018/Feb/02/2001872886/-1/-1/2018-NUCLEAR-POSTURE-REVIEW-FINAL-REPORT.PDF>

ⁱⁱⁱ Press Operations, US Department of Defence, “Remarks by Secretary Mattis on the National Defense Strategy,” <https://www.defense.gov/News/Transcripts/Transcript-View/Article/1420042/remarks-by-secretary-mattis-on-the-national-defense-strategy/>, Accessed on 02 February 2018.

^{iv} The Department of Defence, The US Government, “Summary of the 2018 National Defense Strategy

Sharpening the American Military’s Competitive Edge,” [tps://www.defense.gov/Portals/1/Documents/pubs/2018-National-Defense-Strategy-Summary.pdf](https://www.defense.gov/Portals/1/Documents/pubs/2018-National-Defense-Strategy-Summary.pdf), Accessed on 02 February 2018.

^v Ibid.

^{vi} Ibid

^{vii} Ibid

^{viii} The Office of the Press Secretary, The White House, “Statement by President Donald J. Trump on the Nuclear Posture Review,” <https://www.whitehouse.gov/briefings-statements/statement-president-donald-j-trump-nuclear-posture-review/>, Accessed on 05 February 2018.

^{ix} Press Office, US Department of Defence, “Nuclear Posture Review,” <https://media.defense.gov/2018/Feb/02/2001872886/-1/-1/2018-NUCLEAR-POSTURE-REVIEW-FINAL-REPORT.PDF>, Accessed on 05 February 2018.

^x Ibid

^{xi} Ibid.

^{xii} Ibid