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U.S. Nuclear Posture Review (NPR) 2018: "From a World without Nuclear Weapons to a New Era of Nuclear Arms Race?"

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The U.S. Nuclear Posture Review (NPR) for 2018 was released on February 2. The NPR is to establish U.S. nuclear policy and strategy, set objectives and military capability posture that will continue for five-to-ten years. Since the end of the Cold War, the U.S. published three NPRs—one under the Clinton administration in 1994, another under the Bush administration in 2002, and one under the Obama administration in 2010—and the newly-released NPR is its fourth iteration.

The environment regarding the nuclear weapons has evolved extensively since the last NPR was released in 2010. The U.S. administration seems to have postulated following points concerning international security threats at the time of drafting the NPR in 2010: the possibility of military conflict with Russia or other major powers have diminished; and the reduction of roles and number of nuclear weapons could mitigate the threat of a nuclear war or prevent nuclear proliferation. In accordance with these postulations, the Obama administration reached various agreements with Russia over the reduction of nuclear weapons and as a result, the U.S. nuclear stockpile shrank by 85 percent compared to the number of nuclear warheads that peaked during

the Cold War. President Obama received the Nobel Peace Prize by proclaiming the vision of a world without nuclear weapons in Prague. Obama's vision made the maiden step with the first Nuclear Security Summit held in Washington in 2010.

In comparison, what changes does the 2018 NPR reflect? The perception underlying this NPR in line with the National Security Strategy (NSS) issued late last year is that the revival of great power competition lies at the heart of impending U.S. security threat and that the U.S. should adjust its nuclear posture corresponding to this perception. This idea stands in the same context with the narrative that the U.S. defines revisionist powers such as China and Russia as the largest security threat—and the National Defense Strategy (NDS) issued right after mentioned that terrorism no longer is the largest threat to the U.S. and the strategic competition among the conventional major powers poses the largest threat. Especially, Russia has developed diverse weapon systems undefined in existing treaties on nuclear arms reduction and violated those treaties.

Given such changes in circumstances, this NPR reflects the view that while nuclear weapons should not

be used easily, there should be the fear that it will be used in the worst case scenario for the nuclear deterrence to work. The phrase ‘flexible, tailored nuclear deterrence strategy’ epitomizes U.S. nuclear posture laid out in the 2018 NPR. The NPR enumerated the following four objectives of U.S. nuclear strategy: “deterrence of nuclear and non-nuclear attack”; “assurance of allies and partners”; achievement of U.S. objectives if deterrence fails”; and “capacity to hedge against an uncertain future.”

Specifically, the NPR reaffirmed the values of conventional deterrence of nuclear triad (submarines (SSBNs) armed with submarine-launched ballistic missiles (SLBM), land-based intercontinental ballistic missiles (ICBM), strategic bombers) and elucidated the continuation of the modernization project designed under the Obama administration. In addition, it proclaimed the modernization of nuclear command, control, and communications (NC3) system and investments in the enhancement of nuclear weapons infrastructure. Especially, it emphasized that it will shore up deterrence through a tailored nuclear strategy based on flexibility. The NPR recognizes that the deterrence of ‘one size fits all’ does not exist and that the U.S. should have a flexible approach that enables the U.S. to effectively deter the adversaries according to the context and situation. This is interpreted as the development and deployment of low-yield nuclear weapons (tactical nuclear weapons). And the review also illustrated that the nuclear weapons will be employed only in “extreme circumstances” —defending the vital interests of the U.S., its allies, and partners.

Predictably, heated debates have been initiated regarding the 2018 NPR between those who assert that the U.S. should modernize its outdated strategic nuclear capabilities and those who voice concerns of increased likelihood of a nuclear war as it lowered the threshold for the use of nuclear weapons. How

should we view the 2018 NPR?

First, the new U.S. nuclear posture seems risky as it lowered the threshold of a nuclear war. For example, different from previous NPRs, the 2018 NPR stated that the U.S. could retaliate against a conventional attack on nuclear command and control infrastructure, with nuclear weapons. The narrative of increasing low-yield nuclear weapons is directly linked to the concern that the U.S. president might make the decision to use nuclear weapons more easily in contingency. Experts that favor the development of low-yield nuclear weapons point out that the nuclear weapons that the U.S. currently possess are too explosive and deadly to be actually employed. To them, the U.S. is de facto in a ‘self-deterring’ state and its adversaries are well aware of this fact. For this reason, the proponents of low-yield nuclear weapons claim that the U.S. should produce low-yield nuclear weapons to clearly demonstrate that the U.S. could actually use nuclear weapons. Nevertheless, this NPR does not address why and how low-yield nuclear weapons raise strategic stability and reduce the risk of a nuclear war. The U.S. initiative to produce ‘usable’ nuclear weapons will probably engender a security dilemma for itself as well as other states.

Second, the NPR will signal the beginning of a new nuclear arms race. It is easy to discover evidence that the era of nuclear disarmament that continued for more than three decades since the collapse of the Soviet Union is coming to a close and a new nuclear arms race is about to begin. The review states that Russia is modernizing more than 2,000 tactical nuclear weapons and developing diverse weapon systems that breach the terms of intermediate-range nuclear force treaty (INF) signed in 1987. The latecomer China’s rate of increase in nuclear warheads surpasses other states in the world and has made considerable investments in modernizing its nuclear capabilities. Recently, it also successfully tested the interception of ICBM outer

space. In Europe where it experienced the threat from Russia through the Ukrainian crisis, France increased its defense budget to 300 billion euros for seven years and explained that it earmarked 37 billion euros for the modernization of nuclear weapons.

Third, the publication of the review raises alarm bells of weakening the international nuclear non-proliferation regime. The negative security assurance of no-first-use against non-nuclear states has been one of the key pillars of the NPT regime. However, stating to use nuclear weapons against conventional attacks breaches this principle, eventually undermining the NPT regime. Moreover, the U.S. administration revealed that it will not attempt to ratify the Comprehensive Nuclear Test Ban Treaty (CTBT) at the Senate, but continue to support Comprehensive Nuclear Test Ban Treaty Organization (CTBTO) Preparatory Committee. Furthermore, it clearly opposed the Treaty on the Prohibition of Nuclear Weapons (otherwise known as Nuclear Weapons Ban Treaty), sealed in 2017, stating that it posits an unrealistic expectations of eliminating nuclear weapons without improving the current security environment – thus, posing a security threat to not only the U.S. but also its allies and partners.

As the threat of North Korean nuclear missile gradually being a reality to the U.S., those supporting the development of low-yield weapons and tactical nuclear weapons have gained

voices within the U.S. The so-called ‘bloody nose’ strategy – a limited preemptive strike against North Korea – has been discussed here and there. The NPR reconfirmed that the complete, verifiable, and irreversible denuclearization on the Korean Peninsula still remains the long-term U.S. goal. And it warns that it will be the end of the regime once North Korea attacks the U.S. or its allies. In other words, it indicates that there is no scenario in which the Kim Jong-un regime could survive after using nuclear weapons. However, the Kim Jong-un regime declared that North Korea achieved the perfection of state nuclear force. This foreshadows the lingering confrontation and tension surrounding the denuclearization between North Korea and the U.S. – the former seeking to guarantee its survival by nuclear force and the latter aiming at complete denuclearization of the Korean Peninsula. Such prospects create a dilemma for South Korea as well. What is the South Korean government’s policy on the North Korean nuclear program? Is Seoul prepared to seek North Korea’s denuclearization at all costs? Or does it assert the non-acceptance of the North Korean nuclear possession and denuclearization as a mere rhetoric and in reality, satisfied with maintaining peace even with nuclear-armed North Korea? It is high time to strengthen multifarious efforts to achieve denuclearization on the Korean Peninsula amid the increasing risk of a nuclear war.

This article is based on the author's personal opinion and does not reflect the views of the Sejong Institute.

*Translator's note: This is an unofficial translation of the original paper which was written in Korean. All references should be made to the original paper.

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