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Summary of the 2010 Nuclear Posture Review (NPR)

- The Nuclear Posture Review is a comprehensive assessment of U.S. nuclear policy and strategy conducted by the U.S. since the Cold War. The NPR is also a “roadmap” for successfully implementing President Obama’s vision to rid the world of nuclear weapons. The NPR places significant importance on the prevention of nuclear terrorism and proliferation around the world. This is the third NPR since the end of the Cold War with previous reviews being done in 1994 and 2001.
- The report highlights five key objectives for future U.S. policy, which include prevention of nuclear proliferation and nuclear terrorism; reducing the role of nuclear weapons in national security strategy; maintaining the strategic deterrence and stability, but at reduced levels; the strengthening of regional deterrence to reassure U.S. allies and partners; and sustaining a safe, secure, and effective nuclear arsenal.
- During the release of the report, Secretary Gates specifically highlighted the consequences that proliferators would face if they continued to not play by the rules, particularly Iran and North Korea. “So there is a message for Iran and North Korea here, it is that, if you're going to play by the rules, if you're going to join the international community, then we will undertake certain obligations to you, and that's covered in the NPR. But if you're not going to play by the rules, if you're going to be a proliferator, then all options are on the table in terms of how we deal with you,” Gates said.
- The report included changes to current U.S. nuclear policy. The NPR noted that the U.S. would not use nuclear weapons against non-nuclear weapons states that are party to the NPT and in compliance of its non-proliferation obligations. For example, the report indicates that any state that uses a chemical or biological weapon to attack the U.S. or its allies, but is still in compliance with its NPT obligations, would face a devastating conventional military response and not a nuclear response from the U.S. The NPR emphasized that “in the case of countries not covered by this assurance – states that possess nuclear weapons and states not in compliance with their nuclear non-proliferation obligations – there remains a narrow range of contingencies in which U.S. nuclear weapons may still play a role in deterring a conventional or CBW attack against the United States or its allies and partners.”
- The NPR states that “the fundamental role of U.S. nuclear weapons, which will continue as long as nuclear weapons exist, is to deter nuclear attack on the United States, our allies, and partners.”
- The NPR also touched on the issue of nuclear deterrence for allies and partners against nuclear attacks. The report highlighted the regional deterrence in Asia and Middle East through bilateral alliances and security relationships. In particular, missile defense is an “essential element of the U.S. commitment to strengthen regional deterrence against states of concern.”
- The report indicates that an attack on an ally or partner of the U.S. would receive an appropriate response. “The U.S. nuclear posture has a vital role to play in regional security

architectures. Proliferating states must understand that any attack on the United States, or our allies and partners, will be defeated, and any use of nuclear weapons will be met with a response that would be effective and overwhelming.”

- In addition, any attack on the U.S. or its allies would force the U.S. hold fully accountable any individual responsible for the attack, whether they are national leaders or military commanders. During the release of the report, Secretary Gates added, “the United States will continue to hold accountable any state, terrorist group or other non-state actor that supports or enables terrorist efforts to obtain or use weapons of mass destruction, whether by facilitating, financing, or providing expertise or safe haven for such efforts.”
- The report noted that the coming years will require the U.S. to give top priority to “discouraging additional countries from acquiring nuclear weapons capabilities and stopping terrorist groups from acquiring nuclear bombs or materials to build them.”
- The NPR highlighted issues of importance for the U.S. with China and Russia and the hope of ensuring strategic stability with these nuclear powers. In particular, the report discussed the recent agreement between the Russians and the U.S. on a new Strategic Arms Reduction Treaty (START). “The United States will pursue high-level, bilateral dialogues on strategic stability with both Russia and China, which are aimed at fostering more stable, resilient, and transparent strategic relationships.”
- The U.S. continues to stay committed to renewing and strengthening the NPT in order to cope with the challenges of non-compliance and the growth of nuclear power. The U.S. supports the expansion of access to peaceful nuclear technology, but to be carried out in a way that “does not promote proliferation of nuclear weapons capabilities.”