New US nuclear doctrine targets Iran, North Korea

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The new Nuclear Posture Review (NPR) issued by the Pentagon Tuesday is being hailed by the Obama administration's apologists as a step towards global nuclear disarmament. It is nothing of the kind.

The document lays out a rationale that would justify the use of nuclear weapons against a non-nuclear state for the first time since the US atomic bombing of Hiroshima and Nagasaki. Iran and North Korea are singled out as potential targets.

The 72-page document was issued the day before Obama set off on a trip to Prague, the capital of the Czech Republic, where he will sign a nuclear weapons treaty with Russian President Dmitri Medvedev on Thursday. Like the NPR, the new treaty is being billed by the White House as an effort to reduce global stockpiles of nuclear weapons and make their use less likely. This too is a political smokescreen, aimed at disguising the growing danger of war.

Many details of the US-Russia treaty remain unclear, but the consensus of arms control professionals is that the reductions are largely cosmetic, and actually smaller proportionally than the last such agreement negotiated by the Bush administration in 2002. The US and Russia will reduce the number of deployed nuclear-capable missiles and bombers to 700 each, a reduction of about 100 to 200 apiece. The definitions are so loose, however, that the actual number of warheads available for use will remain virtually the same.

The NPR document was issued by Obama's secretary of defense, Robert Gates, a holdover from the Bush administration and a CIA hardliner throughout the last two decades of the Cold War. This alone should rebut claims that the new nuclear doctrine is a step towards disarmament, let alone pacifism. It was Gates who declared, less than two years ago, that Washington needed to reserve the right of first use of nuclear weapons in the event of chemical and biological attacks on targets in the United States or allied powers.

The document rejects calls for declaring that the "sole purpose" of possessing nuclear weapons is to deter their use by others—otherwise described as a pledge of "no first use"—leaving open the possibility that nuclear weapons could be utilized in an American military operation that begins as a conventional war, like the Gulf War of 1990-1991 or the ongoing wars in Iraq and Afghanistan.

The White House also backed off on Obama's promise, during the presidential campaign, to remove US nuclear weapons from a "hair-trigger alert," under which they can be launched at a moment's notice against targets in Russia. The military brass reportedly objected to such a move, and there will be no significant change on the alert status of the huge US nuclear arsenal.

The major change in the new document is to shift the immediate focus of US nuclear weapons planning from Russia and China, the main targets throughout the Cold War, to what the Bush administration called "rogue states" and the Obama administration designates "outliers"—those countries that are the most likely targets of US military action.

The new Pentagon doctrine bars authorizing a nuclear strike against a non-nuclear country that uses chemical or biological weapons, but this pledge is only for show, since the US reserves the right to change the policy in the event of significant advances in biological weapons capability in the future.

More significant is that the "ban" specifically excludes countries designated as not in compliance with the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty (NPT). The US officially considers North Korea and Iran as not in compliance, although Iran has not been so designated by the UN agency, the International Atomic Energy Agency, that enforces the treaty. North Korea withdrew from the NPT before carrying out its first successful nuclear weapons test in 2006.

Gates made the targeting of these two countries explicit, telling a Pentagon press conference: "There is a message for Iran and North Korea here…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."

In two other areas of nuclear strategy, the Obama

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administration largely continues the policies of George W. Bush, albeit with a great deal of unwarranted posturing about peace and disarmament, of the kind that was rewarded with last year's Nobel Peace Prize.

The Pentagon claimed that the United States would no longer build new nuclear weapons. "No new testing, no new warheads," said Marine Gen. James Cartwright, vice chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff and the principal commander of US nuclear strike forces. But as the *Los Angeles Times* noted, "officials said later that the policy could allow them to bring back older, tested warhead components and designs to build what would be, for all practical purposes, a new weapon."

The Obama administration budget includes $5 billion for the Department of Energy to carry out what Gates called "a credible modernization plan necessary to sustain the nuclear infrastructure and support our nation's deterrent." There are also billions set aside for advanced radars and sensors to make non-nuclear missile strikes more accurate and effective.

The NPR also makes missile defense systems a major strategic objective. The administration rebuffed Russian demands to include missile defense in the nuclear weapons treaty that Obama and Medvedev will sign Thursday. Speaking Tuesday in Moscow, Russian Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov warned that Russia could withdraw from the treaty if it felt that its strategic nuclear forces were threatened by advances in US missile defenses.

The release of the nuclear weapons doctrine produced predictable fulminations about appeasement and disarmament from prominent Republican politicians. Rudolph Giuliani, former mayor of New York and presidential candidate, told *National Review Online*, "A nuclear-free world has been a 60-year dream of the left, just like socialized health care. This new policy, like Obama's government-run health program, is a big step in that direction."

The comparison is apt, although not for the reasons given by Giuliani. Like health care "reform," the Obama nuclear weapons doctrine is an effort to shift government policy to the right while using reformist phraseology. Health care restructuring will cut overall spending on medical services for the American people, just as the nuclear "reduction" means increased spending on the military and a greater likelihood that nuclear weapons will actually be used in war.

Republican senators John McCain and Jon Kyl issued a joint statement demanding that the Obama administration "take no option off the table" in its nuclear weapons policy. It is unclear whether Senate Republicans will seek to block the new US-Russia treaty, which requires a 67-vote majority in the Senate for ratification.

Former Bush officials, however, emphasized the continuity of policy between the two administrations. Gates, of course, had the final say over the nuclear doctrine, along with top military officers like the chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, Admiral Michael Mullen, another Bush appointee.

Nicholas Burns, undersecretary of state for political affairs under Bush, welcomed the new policy and its "very tough line" on Iran. "Renegade states like Iran and North Korea…are truly disruptive and a threat to the world," he said. "It seems to me that this new nuclear policy review by the Obama administration strengthens the ability to the United States to counter that threat and safeguard American interests."

The *Wall Street Journal*, a rabid opponent of the Obama administration in most spheres, published a news article on the nuclear weapons doctrine declaring that it represented "only modest changes to US nuclear forces, leaving intact the longstanding US threat to use nuclear weapons first, even against non-nuclear nations."

In an interview with the *New York Times* Monday, Obama escalated his demands on Iran, declaring it was not just that the US government opposed Iranian possession of nuclear weapons, but that Iran should not become a "nuclear-capable state."

"I think that the international community has a strong sense of what it means to pursue civilian nuclear energy for peaceful purposes versus a weaponizing capability," he said. "And a weaponizing capability is obviously significant as we evaluate whether or not Iran or any other country is serious about these issues."

Since a "capability" refers mainly to the possession of critical technological and scientific knowledge, eliminating such a capability would require the destruction of the advanced engineering infrastructure that Iran has developed over many decades.

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