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Continuity Is Not Consensus: The Future Nuclear Posture Review

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Leaked a month before its actual release, the 2018 Nuclear Posture Review (NPR) initially unleashed a frenetic and somewhat nasty debate, especially on Twitter among nuclear policy geeks, wonks, advocates, and gadflies. The sky was falling, or nothing had really changed—depending upon whom you asked. An already polarized nuclear policy community found reasons to argue, and it did so vociferously. And yet, in the months since the somewhat anti-climactic release of the “real” report, the NPR has been enjoying a honeymoon of sorts. Domestically, it received strong support and close to full funding in the Republican Congress. In fact, many national security Republicans favored more robust nuclear policy and supported more controversial policy positions on issues like Intermediary-Range Nuclear Forces (INF) Treaty, New START, and declaratory policy that the NPR moderated or rejected. As for funding, this is the first time since 2008 that the full defense budget has been passed, securing the Department of Defense (DoD) a [\\$686 billion budget for FY2019](#). Part of this budget will be used [to modernize](#) the nuclear triad, including the nuclear command, control, and communications system (NC3) and its supporting infrastructure. Additionally, the Department of Energy (DoE) received \$44.6 billion in appropriations, with \$11.1 billion specifically set aside for [weapons activities within the National Nuclear Security Administration \(NNSA\)](#). The implementation process within DoD and DoE also seems to be moving along with minimum friction or controversy.

Internationally, the NPR also received surprisingly strong support among allies, especially NATO members. The strong support is in part a confirmation of the changed security environment reflected in the NPR, and in part reflects a sense of relief that the review did not take more extreme or controversial positions that many, especially in Europe, had feared. At the same time, North Korea and Iran have dominated the nuclear landscape and the headlines. But even these factors don’t fully explain the absence of controversy for a community that usually wears its emotions on its Twitter sleeve. One explanation—a classic case of calm before the storm—is that opponents of the Trump administration’s nuclear policy are keeping their powder dry and waiting for the right time to make their case. That time

might be right around the mid-term election corner. The NPR's honeymoon may soon be coming to an end.

Even if one or both chambers don't change hands during the mid-term elections, we can expect narrower majorities. Representative Adam Smith, who would be expected to take the helm of the House Armed Services Committee if Democrats gain control of the House, has already signaled an intention to take funding and policy of nuclear weapons in a different direction, [saying that nuclear weapons are the number one difference](#) between the parties in terms of national security spending: "I think the Republican party and the nuclear posture review contemplates a lot more nuclear weapons than I—and I think most Democrats—think we need. We also think the idea of low-yield nuclear weapons are extremely problematic going forward ... When we look at the larger budget picture, that's not the best place to spend the money." A group of Democrats signaled even stronger change could be coming when they introduced bills to the House and Senate on September 17 that [seek to prohibit the research and development, production, and deployment of low-yield Submarine-launched ballistic missiles \(SLBMs\)](#). The somewhat controversial "supplemental capabilities"—the low yield SLBM and possible reintroduction of a sea-launched nuclear cruise missile into our nuclear arsenal—are most likely to find their way into the budget-cutting cross-hairs of a Democratic Congress. And yet, those seeking meaningful savings in the defense budget will be disappointed to realize just how little these supplemental capabilities have to offer. These capabilities [are at best rounding errors](#) in the overall nuclear modernization program that will cost \$50 billion in the next 10 years and an estimated \$1.2 trillion over the lifetime of the programs. There is no way to salami slice our way to meaningful budget reductions in the overall modernization program. Upgrades to the weapons complex, sustainment of the life extension programs, and improvements to Command and Control (C2) and cyber resiliency are not optional. You can't buy half a leg of the nuclear triad or responsibly continue to extend systems that are long past their service life. The systems are aging out, and there is no wiggle room. Cuts to the core program would require big, painful choices if the goal is saving serious money. For those who think the U.S. nuclear arsenal could be the budgetary "easy button," the disappointment will be deep. Preservation of the nuclear triad and commitment to both pursuing arms control AND modernizing our nuclear deterrent—including maintaining the triad—is the heart of the remaining fragile consensus about U.S. nuclear weapons, and if that unravels, a lot of other things will as well.

Hoping to shore up this fragile consensus on nuclear modernization, NPR drafters and spokespersons have stressed “the 2018 NPR represents continuity” and discounted change when discussing the NPR. However, continuity is not the same as consensus.

To a large extent it’s true there is a large amount of continuity, especially on the broad outlines of U.S. nuclear posture and declaratory policy. The problem is that the areas of discontinuity happen to be very important to people on both sides of the issue. So, continuity on broad, but less controversial issues does not necessarily offset discontinuity in other important areas such as beliefs about the fundamental role of nuclear weapons and the utility of “supplemental capabilities,” the role and future of arms control and the relative priority of nonproliferation, and nuclear security and deterrence.

There is also a sense of disingenuousness that doesn’t sit well. If this NPR shares so much continuity with its predecessors, then why did the 2010 review come under such vociferous criticism from many of the drafters of the current one? The other problem is that the words on the page do not represent the sum total of U.S. policy in these areas. The words and actions of the president play heavily here and in ways that few would argue represent continuity. Finally, it isn’t constructive to keep insisting “but you agree with me, really you do” to someone who feels they have a substantive disagreement on an issue of importance to them. It comes across as belittling and patronizing. And if that doesn’t work for policy wonks, it really won’t work amongst politicians.

What do we need to do instead? Focus on consensus—how to build it and maintain it during what are certain to be challenging times. That requires finding and building common ground and listening respectfully to concerns. Above all, it will require compromise. Sustained bipartisan commitment to modernization of our nuclear infrastructure and delivery systems as well as arms control in the form of the five-year extension of New START and enhanced strategic stability dialogues with Russia would be a good place to start.

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