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The 2010 U.S. Nuclear Posture Review and Its Implications for Japan BY SHINICHI OGAWA

On April 6, the Obama administration issued its long-awaited 2010 Nuclear Posture Review (NPR) that will guide U.S. nuclear weapons policies and posture into the future. One of the most important components of the 2010 NPR is America's commitment to narrow the role of nuclear weapons within U.S. national security policy. For some time, the United States has regarded its nuclear arsenal as usable for a wide range of contingencies, ranging from deterring nuclear and non-nuclear attacks against the United States and its allies to even a means for preventive or preemptive attack.

Even though the role of U.S. nuclear weapons had declined significantly in recent decades, the United States has continued to maintain a declaratory policy of "calculated ambiguity" about possible U.S. nuclear responses. This "calculated ambiguity" policy essentially means that the United States chooses not to specify what responses it would make in reaction to a chemical and biological weapon (CBW) assault upon the United States and its allies.

Based on confidence in the ever-increasing capabilities of U.S. conventional weapons, the new NPR modifies the "calculated ambiguity" doctrine, and further reduces the anticipated role of U.S. nuclear weapons, by declaring that their "fundamental role" is to deter nuclear attacks on the United States or its allies. In line with this declaration, the 2010 NPR pronounces that the United States will not use, or threaten to use, nuclear weapons against non-nuclear weaponized Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty (NPT) compliant states, even if those states employ CBW against the United States or its allies. Thus, the "calculated ambiguity" doctrine no longer applies to non-nuclear NPT states that are in good standing with the NPT and other nuclear non-proliferation rules.

Such a strengthened U.S. negative security assurance is consistent with the purposes of the NPT. It also sends a message to noncompliant states, including North Korea and Iran, that they will not be the target of U.S. nuclear weapons if they come back into full compliance with the NPT and other non-proliferation obligations. Since it does not categorically state that deterring a nuclear attack is the "sole purpose" of U.S. nuclear weapons, the 2010 NPR does envisage the use of nuclear weapons against non-nuclear attack, and implies the possibility of a nuclear response to a non-nuclear assault by a nuclear state or non-nuclear state not compliant with the NPT. However, this NPR stresses that the United States would "only consider the use of nuclear weapons in extreme circumstances to defend the vital interests of the United States or its allies and partners."

The 2010 NPR suggests that, by demonstrating a commitment to a reduced reliance on nuclear weapons, the American nuclear posture plays a critical role in the U.S. ability to deal with the problems of nuclear proliferation and terrorism. Some may argue that reducing the role of U.S. nuclear weapons does not discourage nuclear proliferation and nuclear terrorism. However, downgrading U.S. reliance on nuclear weapons can strengthen the position and leadership of the United States within the international community towards the goals of non-proliferation and countering nuclear terrorism.

What implications does the new NPR have for the U.S. extended nuclear deterrence over non-nuclear Asian allies such as Japan? Given President Obama's resolute commitment to reducing

Shinichi Ogawa, Visiting Professor at Ritsumeikan Asia Pacific University, explains that "Given President Obama's resolute commitment to reducing the role of U.S. nuclear weapons, some Japanese defense experts were worried before the release of the new NPR [Nuclear Posture Review] that the Obama administration might announce a policy of 'no-first use' for nuclear weapons."

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the role of U.S. nuclear weapons, some Japanese defense experts were worried before the release of the new NPR that the Obama administration might announce a policy of “no-first use” for nuclear weapons. Since a nuclear no-first use policy radically reduces the role of nuclear weapons to the limited function of deterring nuclear attack alone, these Japanese experts were uncomfortable about the implications of such a policy for the future of the U.S. extended deterrence for Japan.

However, as the NPR makes clear, the United States has not discarded its nuclear option against a non-nuclear attack by nuclear-armed states, like North Korea, that are not fully in compliance with NPT obligations. As a result, the U.S. extended nuclear umbrella can be expected to work largely as it did before. As Japanese Foreign Minister Katsuya Okada stated after the release of the 2010 NPR, “Through this NPR, the U.S. reassures its commitment to its allies including Japan and partners to provide deterrence, including that by nuclear weapons.”

Nevertheless, America’s non-nuclear Asian allies will note that this NPR stresses that the United States would consider the use of nuclear weapons only in extreme circumstances, and only when the vital interests of the United States and its allies are at stake. Furthermore, it confirms that the United States is determined to strengthen further its conventional weapons capabilities with the objective of making deterrence of a nuclear attack on the United States or its allies the “sole purpose” of its nuclear weapons arsenal. Thus, unless a drastic change in the global security environment occurs, the nuclear option for U.S. extended deterrence is going to continue to decrease.

A reduced future role for U.S. nuclear weapons, however, does not necessarily endanger the reliability of the U.S. extended deterrence, which comprises both nuclear and conventional weapon components. Relying more on conventional weapon capabilities rather than the nuclear component for extended deterrence is reasonable. Retaliation by conventional weapons that permits selective retaliatory attacks and minimizes secondary damage is more credible because unlike nuclear retaliation, they do not guarantee catastrophic human casualties and extensive collateral damage. Additionally, advances in U.S. conventional weapons technology have drastically enhanced their military effectiveness in destroying military infrastructures that previously could only be destroyed by nuclear weapons.

However, one caveat regarding America’s increasing emphasis on conventional strike capabilities is that it risks making North Korea and other NPT-noncompliant states turn more towards weapons of mass destruction. Japan, however, which abstains from deploying external power projection capabilities, can devote itself to its defense capacities, in particular to its rudimentary missile defense system that could buttress deterrence by denial capability. Still, Japan requires not only notice of a hostile incoming missile launch, but also technological and operational cooperation from the United States in operating its missile defense system. If the Japanese ban on the exercise of the right of collective self-defense turns out to be an obstacle to an efficient coordinated operation of its missile defense with the United States, such self-imposed restrictions should be re-examined.

Finally, the 2010 NPR envisages a gradual reduction in the actual numbers of the U.S. nuclear arsenal. Japan should understand that this reduction, through the recently signed START treaty with Russia or a possible post-new START treaty, will not cripple the efficacy of the U.S. extended nuclear umbrella vis-à-vis China or Russia. In terms of nuclear capabilities, the credibility of the U.S. extended nuclear deterrence depends not merely on the second strike capacity of its nuclear forces, but also on the maintenance of an escalation control capability in a nuclear exchange that compels a potential nuclear adversary to take the threat of nuclear retaliation seriously. If one compares the strategic nuclear arsenal of the United States with those of China and Russia, there is no doubt that the capabilities of the United States are overwhelmingly superior. Thus, as long as the United States maintains qualitative superiority in its nuclear forces over those of China and Russia, cooperative numerical nuclear disarmament among the three nuclear weapon states will have little negative impact on the effectiveness of the U.S. extended nuclear deterrent. In view of this, it is imperative that the Comprehensive Test Ban Treaty be immediately implemented and enforced, as this will help ensure the current qualitative superiority of the U.S. nuclear arsenal.