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Living in the Real World: The Nuclear Posture Review

LSE Ideas

By James Cameron

“We live in a real world, not a virtual world” was Nicolas Sarkozy’s veiled riposte to Barack Obama’s vision of a globe free from nuclear weapons, articulated in his Prague speech of April 2009. Some commentators on the right are echoing this criticism in response to the administration’s declaration in its Nuclear Posture Review (NPR), “that the United States will not use or threaten to use nuclear weapons against non-nuclear weapons states that are party to the NPT (Non-Proliferation Treaty) and in compliance with their nuclear non-proliferation obligations.” This would pertain even if the US came under biological or chemical attack.

Internationally, this commitment is important because it seeks to strengthen the NPT prior to the Review Conference in May by providing a clear incentive to be in compliance with the treaty’s terms, whilst bolstering US claims that it will not take advantage of its nuclear status at the expense of those countries without an independent deterrent. However, critics charge that Obama is pursuing his nuclear-free idealism at the expense of American security: they argue that clarifying under what conditions the US would consider using nuclear weapons invites potential adversaries to test those limits, thereby degrading the country’s deterrent.

In fact, the NPR reflects strategic realities. The political costs of using or even threatening to employ nuclear weapons are immense and unpredictable, particularly against a country that does not possess them. By contrast, the US capability to dismantle a state through conventional means has increased exponentially in recent decades and does not carry the same political stigma. Under these conditions, the NPR’s assurance that an American conventional response to a chemical or biological attack would be “devastating” is far more credible than the latent threat of massive nuclear retaliation. Importantly, the pledge does not pertain to those regimes that the administration has designated “outliers”: Iran and North Korea. Nor does it apply to other nuclear weapons states, leaving the US with a free hand in dealing with almost all potential crises where the deterrent could be useful.

The NPR also reflects domestic political conditions by sidestepping arms control advocates’ calls for US commitment to no first use of nuclear weapons. This may reflect divisions within the executive, but it also indicates that Obama is prioritising concrete steps towards disarmament over grand gestures. To ratify the New START treaty, the President will need sixty-seven Senators to vote for it. The administration is already treading a fine line between domestic pressure for freedom of action on missile defence and Russian attempts to restrain US defensive deployments through linkage with New START. Commitment to no first use would have opened up the Senate debate over New START into a wider discussion of whether the administration’s nuclear policy was weakening national security, damaging the treaty’s ratification prospects. At a time of intense partisanship in Congress, it is vital for the administration to defend itself against criticism that equates New START with a degradation of America’s ability to respond to potential threats. The President may have established a global security environment free from nuclear weapons as his ultimate aim, but his steps towards this goal show that he is living in the real world and not a virtual one.

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