

Session 9: U.S. Nuclear Posture Review

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Summary

The 9th session of the 2011 Asan Plenum focused on the U.S. Nuclear Posture Review, and in particular, the perspectives and reactions of the United States, China, and Russia. Dr. Clark Murdock, a senior advisor at the Center for Strategic and International Studies (CSIS), began with a brief introduction to the main issues in the 2010 review. He pointed out that the Nuclear Posture Review (NPR) report is just one of many activities that the Obama administration pursued in its nuclear agenda. Others include New START, the Ballistic Missile Defense Review (BMDR), the Phased Adaptive Approach (PAA), and the Fiscal Year 2011 Budget. In each of these, the Obama administration has shown that it is serious both about the eventual elimination of nuclear weapons as well as the need to maintain a safe, secure, and effective nuclear deterrent as long as nuclear weapons exist. Dr. Murdock highlighted that, among other things, the NPR identifies nuclear terrorism and proliferation as the top priorities for the United States, commits to enhancing strategic stability with Russia and China, argues that the United States should maintain the triad during the 10-year duration of New START, and reveals that the Tomahawk Land Attack Cruise Missile/Nuclear (TLAM/N) will be retired.

Dr. Lora Saalman, a Beijing-based associate in the Nuclear Policy Program at the Carnegie Endowment, followed with a discussion of China's reaction to the U.S. NPR. Like many other audiences, strategic thinkers in China saw both positives and negatives in the NPR. On the one hand, the NPR shifted its focus to terrorism and proliferation and did not explicitly list China as a threat. However, the NPR also argued that high-tech conventional weapons, such as conventional prompt global strike and ballistic missile defenses, might

substitute for roles currently assigned to nuclear weapons. Even though the rhetoric was softened, China analysts remain concerned that their country is an implicit target of U.S. nuclear weapons. They also believe that the United States is locked in a Cold War mindset and fear becoming the next Soviet Union. According to Dr. Saalman, many in China formed their understanding of the NPR based on news reports and speculation. Therefore, the United States might still have an opportunity to alter perceptions.

Mr. Walter Slocombe, a former U.S. Undersecretary of Defense for Policy, spoke last, discussing the Russian reaction to the U.S. NPR. According to Mr. Slocombe, Russian strategic thinkers see an enduring role for nuclear weapons, which they see as both a key symbol of their superpower status as well as an important instrument of military power. While many in Russia might acknowledge that it's an improvement, they still dislike the PAA and, more generally, fear U.S. advantages in missile defenses and precision strike weapons. Slocombe argued that, overall, Russia sees the NPR as fairly conservative. While it takes modest steps to address Russian concerns, it reveals that the United States sees an enduring role for missile defense and CPGS – capabilities that Russia argues are a threat to strategic stability.

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