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Nuclear Posture Review okay, but not ideal

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President Obama's long-awaited Nuclear Posture Review is out today and according to press reports it will please and displease nuclear arms control advocates.

The idea getting most attention, so far, is that Obama has narrowed the role of nuclear weapons in US defense strategy. However, he has also left significant loopholes in these new limitation moves.

The biggest change is a guarantee the US will not use its nuclear weapons against non-nuclear states. The Bush nuclear posture from 2001 left open the option of using nuclear weapons against biological, chemical or mass conventional attack. The Obama review takes a different course.

[T]he United States will not use or threaten to use nuclear weapons against non-nuclear weapons states that are party to the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty and in compliance with their nuclear non-proliferation obligations.?

But there is the catch. The word "compliance" needs to be noted. The US argues Iran is not in compliance with its obligations under the NPT treaty, leaving Iran a potential target in the US nuclear policy plan.

The Obama review does not say that the "sole purpose" of the US nuclear arsenal is to deter nuclear attack, as nuclear disarmers have urged, and the U.S. Catholic bishops have argued makes U.S. nuclear deterrence morally acceptable. Instead the review states that deterrence is the "fundamental purpose" of the system.

At the same time, the review holds that the U.S. will continue to reduce the role of nuclear weapons in deterring non-nuclear attacks.

There is another caveat. The negative security assurance is not irrevocable.

Given the catastrophic potential of biological weapons and the rapid pace of bio-technology development, the United States reserves the right to make any adjustment in the assurance that may be warranted by the evolution and proliferation of the biological weapons threat and US capacities to counter that threat.

There is nothing in what has been released so far on the size of the arsenal.

The review is expected to pave the way for slashing the US stockpile of undeployed warheads, but it will not envisage cuts in the number of deployed warheads from the 1550 agreed last month with Russia in the START treaty.

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