

Orienting the 2021 Nuclear Posture Review

With its March 2021 *Interim National Security Strategic Guidance*, the Biden administration set down its first markers on nuclear policy. On international nuclear diplomacy, it committed to “head off costly arms races and re-establish our credibility as a leader in arms control,” “pursue new arms control arrangements” “where possible,” “engage in meaningful dialogue with Russia and China on a range of emerging military technological developments that implicate strategic stability,” and “renew” US leadership of international nonproliferation diplomacy. This was in the context of a commitment “to elevate diplomacy as our tool of first resort.”¹ On deterrence strategy, the administration committed to “reduce the role of nuclear weapons in our national security strategy, while ensuring our strategic deterrent remains safe, secure, and effective and that our extended deterrence commitments to our allies remain strong and credible.”² This was in the context of commitments “to reinvigorate and modernize our alliances” and “to make smart and disciplined choices regarding our national defense.”³

The new administration now faces the challenge of turning these goals into a practical governance agenda: how should it do so? What can it reasonably expect to accomplish in four years or eight? What steps should it avoid? It has been urged to bold action by many, on the argument that “we are sleepwalking toward the nuclear precipice,” in part because “our strategies reflect old thinking.”⁴ How bold should it be?

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In seeking answers to these questions, the Biden administration would be well served by drawing on the experience of its predecessors, including the Obama administration, which set out nearly identical goals in the president's April 2009 address in Prague.⁵

On Not Pretending

The nuclear security landscape has eroded substantially since 2009

As it considers its options, the Biden administration must have a clear view of the nuclear problem as it exists in 2021. As the interim guidance states, "we cannot pretend the world can simply be restored to the way it was 75, 30, or even four years ago. We cannot just return to the way things were before."⁶ This is undoubtedly true of US nuclear policy. What has changed since 2009?

In 2009, the nuclear danger most concerning to the Obama administration was the danger associated with insecure nuclear materials and the possibility that such materials might find their way into the hands of proliferators or terrorists. Today, this risk remains, despite substantial progress on international nuclear material security made in the Obama era. Other dangers have risen in prominence.

In 2009, North Korea was just crossing the nuclear threshold. Today, it is well on its way to a small force of nuclear-tipped long-range missiles. This shift brings with it new and existential threats to South Korea and Japan as well as the risks of attempted nuclear-backed coercion by North Korea. It also brings new threats to the US homeland, new doubts about the credibility of the US nuclear guarantee to its East Asian allies, and the danger that North Korea might employ nuclear weapons in conflict because of a miscalculation of US resolve.

In 2009, in relations with Russia and China, the Obama administration could focus on strategic stability rather than deterrence because it judged neither relationship to be fundamentally adversarial in character. In 2021, the adversarial quality of both relationships is undeniable. Both have developed approaches to regional wars on their peripheries that include a nuclear component as part of a strategy for countering what they perceive as potentially dangerous US actions. Russia has given nuclear weapons a central place in its military strategy, while China has launched an accelerating build-up of its nuclear forces and is well on its way to becoming a near-peer of the United States (in qualitative, not quantitative terms).

In 2009, allies required some assurances from the Obama administrations following the unilateralism of the George W. Bush administration. In 2021, after four years of Trump diplomacy, allies are far more anxious. Part of the problem stems from the fact that they are in the nuclear crosshairs of neighbors who are improving and increasing their nuclear arsenals. And part of the problem is the crisis of confidence in US leadership that has been brewing for at least a couple of decades but that has become especially intense over the last four years. Restoring allied confidence will require continuity of US purpose over many years and consistency in delivering security benefits to our allies.

Three further dangers have come into sharper focus over the last decade. One is the growing danger of sudden developments that unsettle nuclear planning assumptions by one or more nuclear-armed states. The United States, for example, is increasingly concerned about the potential for strategic surprise associated with geopolitical and technical developments that were not anticipated as it developed its strategic forces, such as a rapid build-up of Chinese nuclear forces or a problem certifying an aging class of warheads as serviceable. Russia is concerned about potential nuclear break-out by the United States. The emerging competition among many countries for disruptive military advantages from emerging technologies adds to concern about strategic stability.

Another is the danger that US threats to employ nuclear weapons may not be seen as credible. Adversaries flirt with the idea that their employment of nuclear weapons can be calibrated to “sober ... but not enrage” the United States—that is, to awaken US leaders and the American public to an asymmetry of stake (favoring the adversary), leading to US de-escalation rather than retaliation.⁷ Allies worry that the United States, if faced with major risks in defending their interests in crisis and war, might choose to politically and militarily “de-couple” from the conflict rather than run those risks.

Finally, there is the danger of the possible collapse of the international nuclear order. The nonproliferation regime is widely perceived as being under increasing stress from various directions. The international nuclear order more generally is tied in direct and indirect ways to the international political order, which is under duress from revisionist rivals and populist voters. Its collapse would bring a new wave of proliferation and new anxieties about the access by non-state actors to nuclear materials, technologies, and weapons.

In sum, the nuclear security landscape has eroded substantially. US policy must be carefully mapped against an up-to-date assessment of challenges and opportunities. It must also come to terms with the lessons of past experience—which do not encourage optimism, especially in light of the eroding environment.

Nuclear Diplomacy as the Tool of First Resort

This catalogue of rising nuclear dangers is rich in problems with difficult, unresolved political disputes at their core, presenting both opportunities and challenges for US nuclear diplomacy.

The Biden administration's commitment to "engage in meaningful dialogue with Russia and China on ... strategic stability"⁸ is a worthy starting point for renewed US diplomatic engagement. But the target has proven elusive—repeatedly. Dialogue with Russia has been episodic and unrewarding; Russia has embraced such dialogues as an opportunity to repeat its large catalogue of complaints about the United States, while rebuffing US counterarguments. China has rejected such dialogues as unhelpfully violating its sense of the necessary opacity in its strategic capabilities and intentions.⁹ Neither credits the United States with a sincere interest in stability, other than "absolute security" (by which they mean US freedom from attack and freedom to attack). Neither seeks to assuage US concerns about mounting nuclear dangers and risks, as they prize those concerns as sources of US restraint.

With the arrival of a new administration in Washington, the time is ripe to try again at Track 1 (official level) and also to get more out of Track 1.5 (unofficial). The challenge will be to overcome legacy concepts and approaches to try to find new clarity and possibly some common ground. In the US-Russia dimension, US thinking must catch up to the increasingly asymmetric strategic postures (nuclear and otherwise) of the two. In the US-China dimension, US thinking must catch up with China's emergence as a near-peer at the strategic level (as defined in qualitative, not quantitative terms). In both strategic relationships, US thinking must catch up with new nuclear instabilities at the regional level of war.

An important question for strategic stability dialogue attaches to the potential value of a restatement of the joint Reagan-Gorbachev statement that nuclear

There has been some convergence in US and Russian thinking

wars cannot be won and thus must not be fought.¹⁰ The Biden administration should seek such a statement. But a too-hasty success could raise as many questions as it answers, given evidence suggesting that Russian military planners may believe that regional nuclear wars can be fought and won because such wars can be kept limited.¹¹ To have a significant impact on perceptions of

nuclear risk, such a declaration should result from, rather than precede, sustained, substantive, and high-level dialogue.

The administration's commitment to pursue new arms control agreements also makes good sense at a time of rising nuclear dangers. But here, too, the objective

remains elusive. For a decade, the United States and Russia have been far apart on the essential elements of a follow-on to New START. Russia seeks a grand bargain based on a “new security equation” encompassing all strategically relevant offensive and defensive capabilities. The United States seeks nuclear predictability and reductions and to maintain the flexibility to adapt its deterrent to meet the challenges presented by North Korea and potentially by other nuclear-armed regional challengers. This divergence reflects the different responses of the United States and Russia to a multipolar security environment. There is not much middle ground here.

But relative to a decade ago, there has been some convergence of US and Russian thinking around views of the strategic military relationship as adversarial and of strategic stability as increasingly troubled by the offense/defense part of the equation. At a minimum, this convergence may make possible a new deal that provides transparency and predictability, though not reductions. It may also make possible new forms of informal measures establishing norms bearing on the introduction of new technologies into the strategic forces of both countries (and China). Something more ambitious would probably require a US willingness to accept binding legal restraints on future missile defenses (another topic where legacy thinking needs to be revisited).¹²

The administration's commitment to renew its leadership of nonproliferation can be helpful in advancing multiple objectives, including renewing high-level efforts to promote nuclear materials safety and security as well as restoring US participation in the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA) with Iran. But here too, success has proven difficult. Part of the problem is the emergence of a set of problems for which US power is insufficient—for example, the DPRK nuclear issue. Part of the problem is the emergence of competitors pushing their own political agendas—for example, the coalition of states and non-governmental organizations (NGOs) supporting the Treaty on the Prohibition of Nuclear Weapons (TPNW, the so-called ban treaty). Part of the problem may be an over-reliance by the United States on leadership by example with actions that are sometimes dismissed as empty gestures. The experience of the Obama administration is salutary. Having taken many steps to demonstrate leadership by example with various forms of nuclear restraint and transparency, it could not lead key stakeholders away from what became the “international humanitarian consequences movement” and then the ban treaty.

With challenges so numerous, it is necessary to set some priorities. Faced with similar circumstances a dozen years ago, the Obama administration settled on a two-step approach. Step one involved focusing on New START, material security, and the NPT review process. Step two involved processes aimed at creating the conditions that would allow the United States to take additional steps at a later time to reduce the number and roles of nuclear weapons and to enable

other nuclear-armed states to safely join in the process.¹³ Think of these possible additional future steps as stretch goals.

The Biden administration has already taken its own version of step one. It has settled on New START extension and renewal of the JCPOA and of the materials “lock down” process as first priorities for its nuclear diplomacy. What stretch goals might it consider? On strategic stability, a valuable stretch goal would be the beginning of a trilateral US-Russia-China dialogue. On arms control, a valuable stretch goal would be Chinese nuclear transparency consistent with the practices of the other four permanent members of the UN Security Council. On nonproliferation, a valuable stretch goal would be agreement at a conceptual level to the main elements of a comprehensive disarmament regime¹⁴ and to the conditions that would have to be created to make it possible. Success in achieving any of these goals is unlikely, but not implausible—and the value for nuclear risk reduction could be significant.

Nuclear Deterrence Choices

Diplomacy deserves its place as the tool of first resort, but its limited prospects invite a full and careful consideration of what else the United States can do to reduce nuclear dangers. How should the Biden administration set about the task of reducing nuclear roles, recognizing that it is not starting from scratch?

There are three basic approaches to further reducing the role of nuclear weapons in US defense strategy: one is to wield an ax—to eliminate one of the remaining functions. The second is to wield a scalpel—to pare back more judiciously, putting the emphasis on changes to the “how” rather than the “what.” The third is to wield a sledgehammer—to entirely replace current strategy with a radical alternative. As it works to reduce the role, what else should the Biden administration do to ensure that deterrence remains effective and that the extended deterrence commitment to allies remains strong and credible?

Wielding the Ax

The simplest way to reduce the role of nuclear weapons would be to lop off one or more of the existing roles. The last four administrations largely converged around four main roles: (1) to deter nuclear and non-nuclear attack on the United States and its forces; (2) to extend that protection to allies and partners, in part to assure them; (3) to achieve US objectives if deterrence fails; and (4) to hedge against an uncertain future. The ax might be used to lop off roles two, three, and/or four in favor of a “deterrence-only” strategy. The case for doing so has been made by various advocates of bold change.¹⁵

The case for axing the role of US nuclear weapons in protecting allies and partners hinges on the assertion that allies can and should be assured by America's own confidence in its strategic deterrent and should not require separate means of assurance. Steve Fetter and Jon Wolfsthal, for example, assert that "the U.S. strategic nuclear arsenal is a highly effective deterrent against such an attack," referring to a nuclear attack on a US ally.¹⁶ Thus, many NGO proposals have been made to eliminate the forward-deployed and forward-deployable non-strategic nuclear weapons and their delivery systems. But US allies have regularly rejected these NGO proposals. Over the last dozen years, for example, every NATO summit has reiterated the collective commitment to the alliance's nuclear sharing arrangements, while allies in East Asia have expressed rising interest in how to get more "NATO-like" extended nuclear deterrence from the United States.

The case for axing the third role (achieving US objectives if deterrence fails) hinges on the assertion that it entails nuclear war-fighting, which, goes the argument, is both uncontrollable and immoral. Proposals for a "deterrence only" posture are premised on the arguments that (1) nuclear attack at any scale on the United States or an ally or partner would so enrage the United States that it would necessarily respond with all means available to it and (2) the threat to so reply would be seen as credible by the potential attacker, who would be deterred. Neither argument stands up to scrutiny. Doubts about the credibility of any nuclear-armed state to respond if attacked are at the heart of decades of debate about nuclear strategy. This strategy would put the US president in a situation of choosing between conceding the interest at stake and national suicide.

The case for axing the hedge hinges on the assertion that steps on the pathway to disarmament should be irreversible. Advocates of this way of thinking are suspicious that investments to ensure an infrastructure capable of generating new nuclear capabilities in a timely manner are just a cover for returning to nuclear arms racing. But adoption of a no-hedge strategy would magnify the risk for the United States of being caught by surprise in a manner that significantly impairs the functions of deterrence. There could be a technical problem in aging US forces that causes one or more legs of the triad to be pulled from service. There could be some dramatic international development calling into question the overall strategic balance. The US strategic posture could badly erode while the United States tries to compensate for lost time. Such an imbalance could incentivize challengers to test US resolve and capacity to compete.

In short, radical surgery is difficult to square with the twin commitments to ensure that deterrence remains effective and that extended deterrence commitments remain strong and credible. A decision to ax one or more existing nuclear roles would not be a smart choice.

A decision to ax one or more existing nuclear roles would not be a smart choice

Wielding the Scalpel

A lighter touch might be applied with changes to declaratory policy and to the practice of nuclear deterrence that reduce reliance on nuclear weapons but stop short of excising a role. Here too, there are many NGO proposals. Most are hardy perennials that reappear every review season to be re-evaluated in light of changed circumstances. The Obama administration, for example, considered de-alerting the ICBM force; withdrawing nuclear-capable fighter-bombers from Europe; and putting forth a declaration of no-first-use, among other measures promoted by supporters as reducing nuclear risk; but it rejected all three, concluding that, on balance, they added more risk than they subtracted.¹⁷ Two other possible initiatives are considered here: conventional substitution and a change to declaratory policy.

Conventional Substitution The Clinton, George W. Bush, and Obama administrations all sought to reduce the role of nuclear weapons by increasing the role of other capabilities. Attention focused on missile defenses against rogue states, conventional prompt-strike capabilities, and regional balances of conventional forces favoring the United States and its allies.

There was some progress on all tracks, until obstacles emerged. Missile defense has been pursued as a complement to nuclear deterrence, on the argument that it can prevent the United States from becoming “de-coupled” from the defense of its allies as it becomes vulnerable to attack by “rogue states” with nuclear-tipped ballistic missiles; but obstacles have begun to emerge as US efforts to “stay ahead” of those threats have generated both rising concern in Moscow and Beijing as well as unwelcome changes to their military strategies and postures. Conventional prompt-strike capabilities have also been seen as a useful complement to

US actions to reduce its reliance on nuclear weapons have not reduced others nuclear requirements

nuclear forces, given the credibility of the threat to employ them, especially preemptively; but it has become clear that their eventual deployment will not help Russia and China reduce their nuclear forces, whatever the impact on US forces. Favorable regional balances of conventional forces help ensure deterrence by denial; but those balances have eroded to the point that the National Defense Strategy Commission concluded in its 2018 report that the United States would likely lose the next major regional war.¹⁸ A

true dilemma has emerged: the US actions to reduce its reliance on nuclear weapons have not reduced the nuclear requirements of others; instead, they generated responses by others that both increased the nuclear threat and eroded the conventional balance.

This dilemma has not disappeared in 2021. The opportunities for conventional substitution of a kind that would materially reduce the role of nuclear weapons in US security strategies appear close to non-existent. In policy debates in 2021, the hope is sometimes expressed that increased reliance on cross-domain deterrence might enable a further reduction in the role of nuclear weapons by increasing reliance on capabilities in cyber space and outer space. Although these means undoubtedly have something important to contribute to deterrence, there is no existing role for nuclear weapons in US strategy that could be supplanted by these new means. Nuclear weapons remain unique in their destructiveness and speed of effect.

“Sole Purpose The scalpel might also be applied to declaratory policy by, for example, removing the role of nuclear weapons in deterring non-nuclear strategic attacks. Here, too, the experience of the Obama administration is a useful reference point. In 2010, it narrowed the role of nuclear weapons with a revised negative security assurance—promising not to employ nuclear weapons against any state in compliance with its nuclear nonproliferation obligations. In so doing, it made the case, like its predecessors, that the fundamental purpose of nuclear weapons is to deter and respond to nuclear attack. After considerable deliberation, President Obama chose not to take the extra step to declare this as their sole purpose, on the argument that he could imagine a narrow range of plausible contingencies in which the vital interests of the United States or an ally or partner might be endangered by non-nuclear means for which the threat of nuclear attack might have a deterrence value.¹⁹

As a result, the Obama administration established “sole purpose” as a long-term goal and committed to try to create the conditions that would make possible its future adoption as policy. These conditions were not spelled out but were implied, given the emphasis on that “narrow range of plausible contingencies.” The pathway to “sole purpose,” as conceived in 2010, lay through strengthening the global bans on chemical and biological weapons and improving conventional deterrence. The Trump administration reviewed all elements of declaratory policy and on these points repeated Obama policy word-for-word.²⁰

The Obama administration maintained this declaratory policy despite repeated debates over eight years, largely on the judgment that adoption of sole purpose without the necessary conditions would weaken deterrence and leave allies vulnerable. It heard from a cross-section of allies in Europe and Asia on these points. They were clear, consistent, and emphatic—so much so that three cabinet officers joined together to advocate against adoption of “sole purpose” during the 2016 Obama “internal review.”²¹ In the administration’s last days, then-Vice President Biden gave a valedictory address on nuclear policy in which he expressed his support for “sole purpose” on the argument that the administration had been successful in taking other steps to reduce

nuclear roles and dangers (conspicuously, he did not address the “other contingencies” requirement).²²

None of the “sole purpose” conditions identified in 2010 have come into being

Does “sole purpose” look more attractive in 2021 than it did in 2010? None of the conditions identified in 2010 have come into being; indeed, they seem more remote than before. In 2021, it is clearer than before that no other nuclear-armed state would be willing to follow the United States in making such a shift. Russia re-validated its current approach to declaratory policy in 2020, retaining a right to first use.²³ The UK and France have also recently set out declaratory policies

that do not align with “sole purpose.”²⁴

In 2021, US allies appear likely to react more strongly than before, given their heightened concerns about the credibility and effectiveness of extended deterrence. The advocates of change argue that “a dialogue is needed ... on the role that nuclear weapons should play in our mutual defense.”²⁵ In fact, such dialogues have been underway with NATO allies for decades and with allies in East Asia since 2009. Their interests and policy preference are well understood and clearly and consistently articulated.

Consider the perspective of allies opposed to “sole purpose” in spring 2021. After four years of President Trump’s criticism of US allies and contempt for US alliances, President Biden arrives having advocated, as vice president and then as presidential candidate, for a policy they have long opposed. Having expressed in 2020 his belief in “sole purpose,” he then promised to “work to put that belief into practice, in consultation with the US military and US allies.”²⁶ This enigmatic statement invites many questions. Has the choice already been made or might consultations yet influence the administration’s course of action? Does “putting this belief into practice” imply a near-term policy choice or a re-embrace of the Obama administration’s conditions-based approach? Is an administration committed to strong and credible extended deterrence really willing to leave its allies newly vulnerable to attacks on their vital interests by non-nuclear means? Is the Biden administration willing to put its long-term disarmament ambitions ahead of their near-term security? And if the Biden administration chooses to proceed with “sole purpose” regardless, how will it square that choice with its commitment to reinvigorate alliances? Some worried allies have privately communicated to me that they would see a Biden administration choice for “sole purpose” following consultations as confirmation of their worst fear about American domestic politics: that Trump’s disdain for allies and alliances infects not only the margins but also the mainstream.

In 2021, the primary audience for “sole purpose” appears to be the sub-communities of non-nuclear weapon states and NGOs supporting the ban treaty, who argue that the United States and other nuclear weapon states must do more to honor their commitments to negotiate in good faith toward the disarmament objective and otherwise demonstrate progress in that direction. They are right to seek such progress. But their satisfaction in gaining a “sole purpose” declaration from the Biden administration would not have a substantial impact on reducing nuclear dangers, nor on advancing practical steps to revitalize pursuit of Article VI of the NPT.

From a risk-reduction perspective, it is difficult to foresee a security bonus of any kind in a US declaration of sole purpose. Ambassador Steven Pifer makes the case for sole purpose on the argument that “it would boost the establishment of an international norm against any nuclear useAnd the only cost: abandoning an option that an American president would never use and whose threat has little credibility.”²⁷ It is difficult to see a norm being strengthened when no one is prepared to follow US leadership by example—and it is easy to see costs to US alliances and extended deterrence beyond those he has identified.

But there is no reason for the Biden administration to walk away from the aspirational goal; indeed, it should re-state the 2010 commitment to an eventual “sole purpose” policy, while arguing that the moment (still) has not arrived when the United States can safely adopt this policy. It should then commit to working to bring into being the necessary conditions. The Biden administration could then go beyond the Obama administration in specifying those conditions, identifying interim milestones, and putting in place processes to achieve those milestones.

Wielding the Sledgehammer

The Biden administration is also being advised to pursue a more fundamental re-making of the US practice of nuclear deterrence. This is not a new argument. But it has gained new prominence with the advocacy of former Secretary of Defense William Perry. In a 2020 book titled *The Button*, Perry and his co-author Tom Collina argue that “U.S. nuclear policy is stuck in a time warp ... nuclear policy and targeting assumptions have changed little since the Cold War ended ... the United States has been prepared for a surprise Russia nuclear attack that never arrived and, in all likelihood, never will.”²⁸

In their assessment, “the greatest danger is not a Russian surprise attack but a US or Russian blunder—that we might accidentally stumble into war.”²⁹ Accordingly, they conclude that major changes to the US practice of nuclear deterrence are overdue. “If there is no significant risk of a disarming first

strike, then there is no need to launch nuclear weapons first, preemptively, or quickly, no need for presidential sole authority other than for retaliation, no need for weapons on high alert, no need to launch weapons on warning of attack, and indeed no need for ground-based missiles at all.”³⁰ They call for the prohibition of launch on warning and of first use, the retirement of all ICBMs, scaling back of other nuclear forces, and other unilateral actions to step back from the nuclear brink. With its emphasis on much smaller and less flexible forces for retaliatory purposes only, this is a new version of oft-stated proposals for minimum deterrence.³¹ In my view, the underlying analysis is flawed and implementation of these recommendations would increase rather than decrease nuclear danger.

Let’s first consider the analysis of nuclear risk. The risk of a blunder leading to nuclear war can never be ruled out. But few experts familiar with the functioning of the command and-control system share the assessment that this is a great danger. The Commission on the Strategic Posture (chaired by Perry), for example, judged in 2009 that the alert postures of the United States and Russia are “highly stable.”³² Moreover, assertions in *The Button* notwithstanding, the United States does not plan to launch under attack. For at least a decade, presidential guidance has specified that US forces should not rely on launch-under-attack. “Rather, U.S. nuclear forces are postured to withstand an initial attack and provide maximum decision-making time for the president to gather information and respond in a time, place, and manner of our choosing ... The U.S. alert system prioritizes surety over speed.”³³

To further reduce the risk of a blunder into Armageddon, the Biden administration should instead focus on the modernization of the command-and-control system as well as additional steps to improve the president’s ability to carefully assess, consult, and deliberate before choosing a course of action in nuclear war.³⁴

This points to the conclusion that the potential value of the “sledgehammer approach” in reducing the risks of strategic blunder has been significantly overstated. Let’s consider also its potential impact on other nuclear risks: the risks of deterrence failures in regional wars, the risks of a breakdown of extended deterrence and assurance, and the risks of unstable multipolarity.

In the current security environment, the risk of a bolt-from-the-blue nuclear attack has been replaced by the risk of deterrence failure in regional wars under the nuclear shadow. These regional wars present three specific nuclear dangers: (1) limited nuclear use within the combat area to signal the intention and resolve to defend interests; (2) expanded use within the theater as a counter to first use and subsequent escalation; and (3) initial and limited homeland nuclear attacks aimed at shocking an enemy into de-escalation.

Conspicuously, these risks attract no discussion in *The Button*, which dismisses the problem of limited attacks and the efficacy of proportionate retaliation. It

does so with the arguments that (1) only cold warriors hold onto the notion that Russia might employ nuclear weapons in a military crisis and (2) “there is every reason to believe that, once attacked with atomic weapons, a nation would be so outraged and/or would assume a full attack was on the way that it would respond with everything they’ve got.”³⁵ But responding to a limited attack “with everything we’ve got” would almost certainly generate an overwhelmingly devastating response. Thus, the threat to respond in this manner is not going to be seen as credible by foe or friend.

Accordingly, the United States needs the capabilities to be able to threaten to respond in limited ways to limited strikes with the hope of signaling both resolve and restraint. These capabilities have been criticized as intended for nuclear “war-fighting,” a pejorative meant to convey a plan to fight and win wars by nuclear means. That is a form of war-fighting for which Russia is well prepared, with the full integration over the last decade of nuclear options in its general-purpose forces.³⁶ The United States pursues limited options as a way to reinforce deterrence and to be capable of employing weapons if necessary, in a militarily effective way and in a manner that holds out some promise of early de-escalation.

The United States also needs options to threaten to respond to larger-scale but still limited attacks on the US homeland that nuclear-armed adversaries might contemplate, again for purposes of demonstrating both resolve and restraint. Without a large ICBM force in the American heartland to contend with in a first strike, an attacker might see a possibility and value in going first with a strike at the small remaining footprint of US nuclear air bases, ports, and storage areas, on the bet that US leaders would not fire whatever might be left at sea because doing so could generate a much larger-scale attack that would leave the United States a wasteland, rather than merely crippled militarily.

Recent presidents have been explicit in wanting options to respond to “21st century contingencies” in a manner that promises the possibility of restoring deterrence at the lowest possible level of damage.³⁷ President Biden should want them as well. They are for deterrence purposes, not war fighting. Thus, implementation of the “sledgehammer approach” would likely increase the risks of deterrence failures in regional wars.

What about the impact of the “sledgehammer approach” on the risks of a breakdown of extended deterrence and assurance as well as the risks of unstable multipolarity? Conspicuously, *The Button* includes no arguments on extended deterrence or on North Korea or China as problems for US deterrence strategy.

On extended deterrence, those US allies most anxious about the credibility and effectiveness of the US deterrent posture are not persuaded by the Fetter-Wolfsthal argument cited above that US strategic forces can be relied on for regional deterrence.³⁸ They attach value to forward-deployable nuclear assets that most NGO advocates do not. And allies worry about steps that would

erode their confidence in US strategic forces, such as ICBM retirement. ICBM retirement would also substantially impair the ability to respond in case of geopolitical surprise or a technical problem crippling some part of the standing force.

On unstable multipolarity, new nuclear risks have emerged with North Korea's progress in arming itself with nuclear weapons and long-range missiles as well as China's progress in modernizing, diversifying, and increasing its nuclear forces. In this new context, the United States must simultaneously deter Russia, a declining nuclear peer deeply opposed to the European security order; China, a rising near-peer in Asia also strongly opposed to the regional security order; and North Korea, a regional challenger rapidly growing a nuclear force presenting an existential threat to US allies. Every presidential administration since the end of the Cold War has emphasized the need to tailor deterrence to new and dissimilar challenges in the emerging security environment. An administration that embraces China as "the pacing threat" cannot simply dismiss China in thinking about US nuclear policy and posture.³⁹

In sum, the "sledgehammer" approach would do more harm than good. Arguments in favor of such bold changes to the US practice of nuclear deterrence generally rest on flawed assessments about the security environment, an exaggerated sense of war by miscalculation, a flawed understanding of existing US practices, and wishful thinking about opportunities to further reduce the role of nuclear weapons in US security strategies.

The sledgehammer approach would do more harm than good

A Smart and Disciplined Approach to Deterrence

A careful review of options to reduce the role of US nuclear weapons in existing international circumstances should come to the conclusions that a great deal has already been accomplished by prior administrations and that the eroding nuclear security environment makes further major changes undesirable. Neither the ax, scalpel, nor sledgehammer can be wielded to good effect at this time if the Biden administration is serious about maintaining an effective deterrent and a strong and credible extended deterrent.

More precisely, proposed alternative approaches to deterrence do not account for plausible pathways to potential nuclear employment by US adversaries or for the need to have limited responses to limited attacks, to deter larger-scale strikes in an escalating war, to extend credible deterrence protection to US allies, to tailor deterrence to multiple potential adversaries, and to hedge against geopolitical and technical uncertainties. Their implementation would increase the risks

that US adversaries might miscalculate US resolve and that US allies might conclude they cannot count on the United States when the nuclear chips are down, leading to more nuclear proliferation. The “new thinking” reflected in these new strategies would take the United States closer to the precipice, not further away. More disciplined thinking is needed.

But there are opportunities to reduce nuclear dangers. Two stand out as especially prominent. The first is to reduce the likelihood of the types of wars that might give rise to nuclear employment. The second is to reduce the incentives for nuclear escalation in such wars.

To reduce the likelihood of such wars, the Biden administration should emphasize a diplomatic strategy aimed at resolving, or at least managing, grievances. It must also carry forward and indeed accelerate the efforts begun in the Obama administration and continued, with adaptations, by the Trump administration to shift military focus onto the challenges of regional wars against nuclear-armed adversaries. It should be mindful of the findings in 2018 of the bipartisan National Defense Strategy (NDS) Commission that the United States “could lose” such a war because of its failure to prepare for its distinct features and to anticipate adversary strategies tailored to exploit US weaknesses and avoid its strengths.⁴⁰ The NDS Commission also made clear that conflict prevention requires a deterrence posture fit for purpose.

The requirements of such a posture include clear statements of presidential intent to defend US and allied interests and an appropriate mix of nuclear and non-nuclear capabilities for deterrence and defense. Consistency of behavior over time to set the conditions for success in war if it proves unavoidable is also required. Such consistency helps address potential misperceptions of US resolve. This line of argument implies that there may be more leverage to reduce nuclear dangers in the Biden administration’s broad review of defense strategy rather than its narrow review of nuclear policy and posture.

To reduce the likelihood of nuclear and other strategic escalation in such regional wars, the Biden administration should also carry forward and accelerate the efforts of its predecessors to adapt and strengthen regional deterrence architectures in Europe and East Asia. This too requires both affirmations of intent and much more. Here too the administration can be usefully guided by the NDS Commission, which in 2018 identified multiple conceptual gaps in deterrence strategy. It concluded that the United States has been responding inadequately to operational challenges including “deterring and, if necessary, defeating the use of nuclear or other strategic weapons in ways that would fall short of justifying

Changes might lead US allies to conclude they cannot count on the US when the nuclear chips are down

a large-scale nuclear response.”⁴¹ This implies that the United States has much more to do to understand how and why such escalation might occur and how to employ its military and political tools, and those of its allies, to shape an adversary’s escalation calculus in a manner that restores deterrence and promotes war termination on terms acceptable to the United States and its allies.

Various improvements are needed, including additional work to develop concepts and doctrine to keep the nuclear threshold high, continued development of an appropriate mix of conventional and nuclear capabilities for deterrence and defense, and additional measures to enable informed presidential decisions. The Biden administration will also have to address the rising demands among East Asian allies for “more NATO-like” extended deterrence and among European allies for continued strengthening of the nuclear sharing arrangements.⁴²

A “smart and disciplined” approach to defining the role(s) of US nuclear weapons and ensuring effective and credible deterrence will also help to settle the debate about how to modernize US nuclear forces. The United States should have the forces its strategy requires. It does not have a minimum deterrence strategy, so it should not have a minimum deterrence posture. The sound decision is to modernize all three legs of the triad. This means the administration should endorse modernization of the ICBM force, given its unique value in raising the threshold to preemptive attack on the United States, in hedging against surprise, and in conducting limited strikes in extreme circumstances.

Charting a Sound Course

As it works to turn its lofty policy goals into a practical governance agenda, the Biden administration must be “smart and disciplined” from the start. A smart and disciplined approach would begin with a realistic appreciation of developments in the global security environment bearing on the requirements of US nuclear deterrence strategy—developments that should lower expectations about what the Biden administration can reasonably hope to accomplish in moving away from the approaches of the last dozen years or so. A smart and disciplined approach would also be informed by the lessons of past experience and by the views of other stakeholders in US nuclear policy, both foreign and domestic. None of this comes naturally to any new administration, especially on these issues. But the failure to understand and, where possible, account for different views only defers to a future time, and a more public venue, disputes over US policy that will trouble its implementation.

A smart approach can and should put international nuclear diplomacy first. The Biden administration can reasonably expect to advance arms control, non-proliferation, and disarmament objectives. But it cannot expect to advance them very far. The problems are hard. US leadership is contested. In seeking to lead by

example, the administration should avoid empty gestures. Instead, it should generate the needed new thinking on those hard problems.

A smart approach would treat reestablishing US arms control leadership and reducing the role of nuclear weapons (the Biden administration's stated policy objectives) as means to an end, not as ends in themselves, given the erosion of nuclear stability over the past decade. The end is the reduction of nuclear danger. This thinking would usefully connect Biden's strategy to what the 2009 Commission on the Strategic Posture called the US "strategic tradition" of balancing military and political means "to reduce nuclear dangers and to preserve the tradition of nuclear non-use."⁴³

A smart approach would also embrace nuclear deterrence as part of the solution (rather than reject it as part of the problem). In this regard, the Obama and Trump administrations followed the advice of the 2009 Commission, which concluded that the practice of US nuclear deterrence is essential to reducing nuclear dangers.⁴⁴ The Biden administration should similarly embrace nuclear deterrence as having a central role in risk reduction. It is essential to the tradition of non-use.

A smart and disciplined approach to nuclear deterrence would recognize that the time is not ripe to further reduce the role of nuclear weapons in US defense strategy and that steps to do so in the near term could generate new nuclear risks. Accordingly, the administration should refrain from sweeping changes to the roles of nuclear weapons or the US practice of nuclear deterrence. It should wield neither the ax, scalpel, nor sledgehammer. Instead, it should focus on reducing the risks of regional wars with nuclear-armed adversaries, while preparing for the possibility that deterrence might fail in a limited way.

How bold should the Biden administration be? Bold enough to insist on an open, honest, and balanced discussion of the issues. Bold enough to state clearly that the security environment is far less hospitable to US leadership on nuclear risk reduction than in 2009. Bold enough to reject the call for sweeping changes to deterrence strategy or posture. Bold enough to be pragmatic.

A smart approach should embrace nuclear deterrence as part of the solution rather than part of the problem

Notes

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