

How the Biden Administration can restore the balance in nuclear policy

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Main points

- The results of the Biden Administration's Nuclear Posture Review are expected early in 2022.
- The contents of the posture review report and the timing of its release will have implications for U.S. nonproliferation policy. These issues should be decided with a view to strengthening the hand of U.S. diplomats at the 10th Review Conference of the Treaty on the Non-Proliferation of Nuclear Weapons, which opens on January 4, 2022.
- News media reports suggest that the Pentagon-led review process has emphasized the requirements of deterrence at expense of the requirements of nonproliferation. It will fall to the White House to remedy any imbalances.

A nuclear balancing act

The Biden Administration will soon make important decisions about nuclear-weapons policy. According to [public remarks earlier this year](#) by the Under Secretary of Defense for Policy, the Nuclear Posture Review must weigh both the credibility of U.S. nuclear deterrence commitments—to adversaries and to allies—and implications of nuclear posture for U.S. arms control and nonproliferation objectives.

These two sets of interests are in many ways compatible. ***But in certain areas, trade-offs between deterrence and nonproliferation interests cannot be completely avoided.*** Nuclear policy could be compared to monetary policy in this respect. The “[dual mandate](#)” of the Federal Reserve Bank means it must set interest rates high enough to control inflation, yet low enough to minimize unemployment. Nuclear policy-makers similarly must find the balance between their two major sets of goals, which sometimes conflict.

U.S. nuclear policy has fallen out of balance over the past decade. The last two administrations have embraced [sweeping plans for nuclear modernization](#), sending a clear message to allies and adversaries alike about America's determination to stay in the nuclear-weapons business. But they failed to offset these plans with sufficient progress on a crucial set of commitments grounded in the [Treaty on the Non-Proliferation of Nuclear Weapons](#), or NPT: to pursue good-faith negotiations toward achieving global nuclear disarmament, to reduce the size of their nuclear arsenals in the meantime, and to diminish the role of nuclear weapons in national-security policy.

What progress can be cited on these fronts is mostly a function of the New START treaty, which entered into force in 2011. The lack of movement since then has contributed to the fracturing of the international consensus on nonproliferation, making it increasingly harder to win the support needed for steps that make it more difficult for additional states to go nuclear.

The consequences of neglect

Strengthening the enforcement of the nuclear nonproliferation regime is a high priority for the United States and its allies. The lessons from North Korea, Syria, and Iran are clear: the existing measures to prevent, detect, and effectively punish cheating are not always sufficient and need enhancement. But advancing this agenda requires the cooperation of more than just a coalition of the like-minded, for at least four reasons.

- Setting high standards for transfers of sensitive nuclear technologies and materials has become increasingly difficult as these technologies have become more widespread. The [Nuclear Suppliers Group](#), which crafts guidelines for nuclear transfers, has grown from seven to 48 participating governments since its founding in 1974. This is a serious challenge for a group that makes its decisions by consensus.
- Strengthening nuclear safeguards to provide greater assurance against cheating, or even against “hedging” toward a weapons option, depends on the willingness of all states with nuclear energy programs to provide more information and expand routine access for international inspectors. A number of states continue to hold out against adopting the “[additional protocol](#)” that grants these authorities.
- It is not necessarily a foregone conclusion that a cheater will be found to have violated the terms of its nuclear safeguards agreements. A total of 35 states are represented at any time on the [Board of Governors of the International Atomic Energy Agency](#), which plays the pivotal role in [determining noncompliance](#), as in the cases of Iraq, North Korea, Iran, Libya, and Syria.
- Depending on a target country’s pattern of trade relations, implementing genuinely effective nonproliferation sanctions against noncompliant states may involve the cooperation of many countries.

The sheer numbers of countries whose cooperation is needed to strengthen nonproliferation would not be so significant a problem if not for the rising impatience of many non-nuclear weapon states with the policies of the United States and the other nuclear-armed states. A sense of drift in efforts to reduce nuclear dangers led them to [negotiate the Treaty on the Prohibition of Nuclear Weapons](#), or TPNW, in 2017. The [TPNW](#), which entered into force in January 2021, bans the possession of nuclear weapons altogether—at least among its members.

These countries' dissatisfaction with the lack of progress toward nuclear disarmament is becoming a significant factor in multilateral nonproliferation diplomacy. At the end of negotiations, 122 states voted to adopt the treaty text. A total of 86 have at least signed the treaty so far, and 56 have ratified it. Among NSG members, seven have ratified the TPNW (Austria, Ireland, Kazakhstan, Malta, Mexico, New Zealand, and South Africa) and another has signed it (Brazil). The present membership of the IAEA Board of Governors includes eight TPNW ratifiers (Austria, Ireland, Kazakhstan, Malaysia, Mexico, New Zealand, South Africa, and Vietnam) and three signers (Brazil, Colombia, and Peru). These numbers are likely to grow.

If cheating on the NPT is to be more reliably prevented or deterred, then it is important that the United States, as the leading champion of nuclear nonproliferation, be seen as a responsible actor that honors its word. Simply put, America retains thousands of nuclear weapons while seeking to deny them to others. Any perception that the unstated goal of this policy is to magnify America's power and prestige at others' expense, and not to reduce the dangers that nuclear weapons pose to human survival, undercuts Washington's ability to persuade others to advance its nonproliferation agenda.

Commitments under the nonproliferation treaty

The United States is one of just five NPT parties that may possess nuclear weapons, along with Russia, Britain, France, and China. These countries had already built and tested the bomb by the time of negotiation in the late 1960s. All other states in the treaty—there are [currently 185](#) of them—are “non-nuclear weapon states.”

The structure of the NPT is often called a “grand bargain.” The non-weapon states have agreed to open their nuclear facilities to international inspections, ensuring that no materials have been diverted from peaceful uses. Meanwhile, the parties must work toward disarmament, although the treaty does not require them to do so on any particular schedule. Article VI of the NPT commits all parties “to pursue negotiations in good faith on effective measures relating to cessation of the nuclear arms race at an early date and to nuclear disarmament.”

The idea of reducing the role of nuclear weapons is connected to this solemn undertaking, which the five NPT nuclear weapon states, including the United States, have periodically reaffirmed.

- In [1995](#), at a review conference held once every five years, the parties agreed to extend the treaty indefinitely, as part of a set or “package” of commitments. Among other points, the five nuclear-weapon possessors reaffirmed their commitment “to pursue in good faith negotiations on effective measures relating to nuclear disarmament.”
- In [2000](#), the five nuclear-weapon states again stated their “unequivocal” commitment “to accomplish the total elimination of their nuclear arsenals leading to nuclear disarmament.” They also pledged to make further reductions to their arsenals and agreed to a “diminishing role for nuclear weapons in security policies to minimize the

risk that these weapons ever be used and to facilitate the process of their total elimination.” All of the NPT parties, meanwhile, called for bringing the Comprehensive Nuclear-Test-Ban Treaty (CTBT) into force “without delay” and commencing negotiations toward a long-awaited fissile-material cutoff treaty (FMCT).

- In [2010](#), the five nuclear-weapon states declared their “unequivocal undertaking to accomplish, in accordance with the principle of irreversibility, the total elimination of their nuclear arsenals leading to nuclear disarmament.”

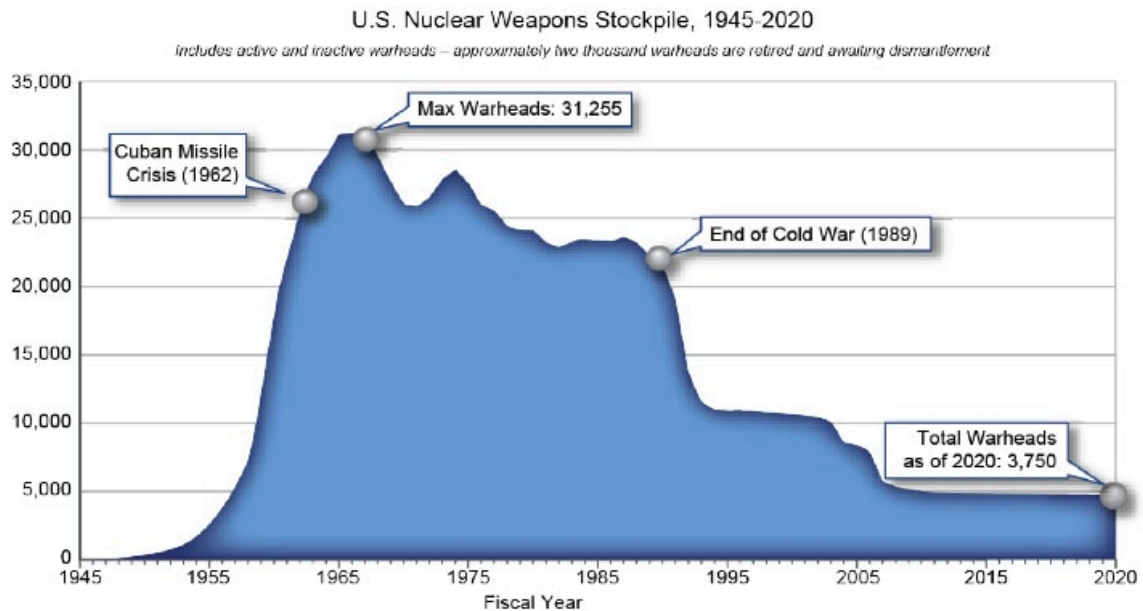
Disappointing progress

On all of these fronts—diplomacy, stockpile reductions, and a narrowing of the role of nuclear weapons—there is considerable room for improvement. Even modest steps in the right direction could be helpful.

So far, unfortunately, diplomacy has achieved scant results. Efforts to ratify and bring the CTBT into force have faltered; negotiations toward an FMCT have still yet to begin. Meanwhile, the Trump administration has withdrawn the United States from the Intermediate Nuclear Forces in Europe Treaty and the Open Skies Treaty. While the Biden Administration quickly agreed with Russia to extend the New START treaty until 2026 and the two sides have launched a potentially meaningful “[strategic stability dialogue](#),” there are no clear prospects yet for a follow-on treaty to further limit strategic arms.

Nuclear reductions continue, but have slowed. The United States [cut its nuclear stockpile](#) by more than half at the end of the Cold War, and it did so again a few years later. But the total warhead number has declined only gradually in recent years. The official figure now stands at 3,750, down from [3,822 in 2017](#).

Figure 1: 2020 U.S. Nuclear Warhead Stockpile



(Other nuclear-armed states are not as transparent about their stockpiles, but the Federation of American Scientists [produces estimates](#).)

There are some obvious limits to continued reductions. Beyond the five recognized nuclear-weapon states, there are another four states to consider: India, Israel, and Pakistan, which have never joined the NPT, and North Korea, which exited it in 2003. Even if that were not the case, the level of trust between the United States, Russia, and China is far from what disarmament would realistically require; the U.S. Department of Defense projects [expects China's arsenal to continue to grow](#) in the coming years. Regardless, with thousands of nuclear warheads still in nuclear stockpiles—roughly 90% of them in American or Russian hands—more progress is possible.

The Obama Administration sought to reduce the role of nuclear weapons in its national-security strategy, starting with the president's [declaration in 2009](#) that the United States was committed "to seek the peace and security of a world without nuclear weapons." In its [2010 Nuclear Posture Review Report](#), the Obama Administration, citing American superiority on the conventional battlefield, further stated that "[t]he fundamental role of U.S. nuclear weapons, which will continue as long as nuclear weapons exist, is to deter nuclear attack on the United States, our allies, and partners." It conceded a "narrow range of contingencies" involving chemical, biological, or conventional attacks where nuclear deterrence might apply. The Trump Administration pushed in the opposite direction in its [2018 Nuclear Posture Review Report](#), stating that "[i]ntegrating and exercising all instruments of power," including U.S. nuclear weapons, is necessary to deter an expanding range of threats. The Trump Administration's posture review report also described U.S. nuclear weapons as having a "necessary, unique, and currently irreplaceable" role in "hedging" against an "uncertain future."

Finding a balance

The results of the Biden Nuclear Posture Review are expected to be released early in 2022. It happens that the 10th Review Conference (RevCon) of the Treaty on the Non-Proliferation of Nuclear Weapons, repeatedly delayed on account of the pandemic, is now [scheduled to open in New York on January 4, 2022 and run most of that month](#). The outcome of the posture review should therefore appear in a timely manner, and its contents ought to strengthen, not weaken, the hand of U.S. diplomats at the RevCon.

Expectations for the RevCon itself should not rise too high. Achieving a consensus outcome, as in 2010, would mean satisfying all NPT member states across a variety of issues. Sometimes no agreement is better than a bad agreement. But the extent of support that the U.S. delegation can attract for its agenda is likely to set the tone for multilateral nuclear diplomacy during the rest of this presidential term. After repeated disappointments, a show of good faith could do wonders.

The White House has already set some expectations. In March 2021, it released an [Interim National Security Strategic Guidance](#) document, declaring that the United States “will take steps 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.” This language is the yardstick against which its upcoming choices probably will be measured.

Even if, as expected, the Biden Administration embraces a version of the far-reaching nuclear modernization agenda pursued by the Obama and Trump Administrations, it can still take steps to restore balance to nuclear policy. These could include:

- Announcing the goal of a follow-on treaty to New START.
- Recommitting to bringing the nuclear test ban into force and to negotiating a fissile material cutoff. It is unlikely that a divided Senate will ratify the CTBT after it failed to do so in 1999, but the absence of these pledges—which appeared in the Obama Administration’s [2010 Nuclear Posture Review report](#)—could be interpreted as repudiating them.
- Committing to continue reducing the overall size of the U.S. nuclear stockpile, preferably by announcing a stockpile reduction target for the presidential term. The decision this fall to resume the practice of [disclosing the stockpile total](#) after a hiatus during the Trump Administration was a small but welcome step that can be built upon.
- Cancelling the sea-launched nuclear cruise missile program proposed on dubious grounds by the Trump Administration. This weapon has no unique missions or capabilities, and the [Navy is reportedly reluctant](#) to accept the heavy financial, logistical, and operational burdens associated with it.

- Adopting narrower language about the role of nuclear weapons in U.S. national security policy. As a starting point, the Biden administration’s nuclear posture review ought to echo the president’s own affirmation that a [nuclear war cannot be won and must never be fought](#). It can also make clear that the United States has no intention of ever starting a nuclear war, or threatening to start one. Ideally, it should state that until nuclear disarmament becomes possible, the only reason to possess a nuclear arsenal is to deter nuclear attack on the United States or its allies and partners.

The president is commander-in-chief of the armed forces, and no form of declaratory policy can actually tie their hands during a crisis. But too much emphasis on flexibility of decision tends to distance the United States from its own repeated and “unequivocal” pledges to reduce the role of nuclear weapons. Acknowledging that nuclear weapons in fact have only a modest role may diminish their prestige, but it will not shake the foundations of U.S. or allied security, and it can only advance U.S. interests in strengthening the nonproliferation regime. In the words of the 2010 Report of the [International Commission on Nuclear Non-proliferation and Disarmament](#), such a statement would do much to “put at rest the perception – so damaging to the cause of non-proliferation – that the nuclear-armed states regard nuclear weapons as an indispensable, legitimate and open-ended guarantor of their own and their allies’ security, which they are born to have but others have no right to acquire.”

Presidential leadership

Judging by the scope of the existing nuclear modernization program, when deterrence is seen as needing reinforcement, it finds strong advocates within Congress and the Department of Defense. Nonproliferation—along with arms control—is less fortunate in its friends. It is neither a symbol of national might nor a major source of employment. Nowhere is it a dominant voice, and it lacks an institutional champion in interagency processes. A Nuclear Posture Review led by the Department of Defense is almost bound to emphasize the needs of deterrence, no matter how well served they already may be. Nonproliferation cannot expect the same attention.

Still, the president gets the last word. And if the Biden Nuclear Posture Review is to achieve a balance between the needs of deterrence and the needs of nonproliferation, then Joe Biden may have to provide it.