

Nuclear Weapons under the Biden Presidency

The International Disarmament Agenda: Civil Society Voices From 7 Key States
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Following four harrowing years culminating with a devastating pandemic, economic collapse, volatile and chaotic international relations, a racial justice uprising and a violent right-wing insurrection, President Joseph Biden entered office facing a daunting array of challenges. Early indications are that on the domestic front, the Biden administration will seek to dramatically reverse the Trump administration's reckless disregard for the pandemic, its xenophobic policies attacking immigrants, people of color, Muslims, Jews, women, non-gender conforming people and the poor, and its assaults on healthcare, the environment and democracy itself.

On foreign policy, the new administration's intentions are less certain. Biden's announcement his first day in office that the United States would rejoin the Paris Climate Accord and the World Health Organization was welcome.

However, based on Biden's eight years as Vice-President under Barack Obama and his appointment of key officials from the Obama administration, we can likely expect a return to the pre-Trump status quo regarding the future of troubled U.S. relations with Russia, China, North Korea, and Iran, as well as U.S. nuclear weapons programs and policies.

Joe Biden has been involved in arms control negotiations since 1979. Shortly before leaving office, on January 11, 2017, then-Vice-President Biden gave his views on the value of treaties: "It is precisely because we do not trust our adversaries that treaties to constrain the human capacity for destruction are indispensable to the security of the United States of America. Arms control is integral to our national defense and—when it comes to nuclear weapons—to our self-preservation."

This is cause for cautious optimism regarding potential follow-on negotiations to the successful extension of the START treaty with Russia and a possible return to the JCPOA, as well as future bi-lateral and multi-lateral arms control negotiations.

But U.S. national security policy has been remarkably consistent since 1945. "Deterrence," the threatened use of nuclear weapons, has been reaffirmed as the "cornerstone" of U.S. national security by every President, Republican or Democrat, since President Harry Truman, a Democrat, oversaw the atomic bombings of Hiroshima and Nagasaki.

In his January 2017 remarks, outgoing Vice-President Biden declared: "As a nation, I believe we must keep pursuing the peace and security of a world without nuclear weapons." But he went on: "A nuclear deterrent has been the bedrock of our national defense since World War II. And so long as other countries possess nuclear weapons that could be used against us, we too must maintain a safe, secure, and effective nuclear arsenal to deter attacks against ourselves and our allies. That is why, early in the administration, we *increased* funding to maintain our arsenal and

modernize our nuclear infrastructure—so that our arsenal remains safe and reliable—even with fewer weapons, and even without tests.”

Donald Trump entered office with the U.S. poised to spend an estimated 1.2 trillion dollars over the next 30 years to maintain and modernize its nuclear bombs, warheads and delivery systems, and the infrastructure to sustain the nuclear enterprise indefinitely. This enormous estimate has gone up to 1.7 trillion dollars or more.

President Biden is on record, in the past, supporting creating the conditions by which the sole purpose of nuclear weapons would be to deter others from launching an attack, and reducing reliance on nuclear weapons in U.S. national security policy. But it is too soon to predict if this will translate into cancellation of planned new weapons systems, much less elimination of ground-based Intercontinental Ballistic Missiles, as advocated by some. In Senate testimony, the newly confirmed U.S. Secretary of Defense promised a review of U.S. nuclear weapons modernization programs but stated his “personal” support for the strategic triad.

Here I want to introduce a cautionary note. There has been a lot of talk about calling on the U.S. to declare a no first use policy, but not much analysis of what that would actually mean.

Warning that the danger of nuclear war with Russia or China is “a very real possibility”, Admiral Charles Richard, Chief of U.S. Strategic Command, in charge of integrated nuclear and conventional war planning, earlier this month declared: “For China, we must pay attention to PRC’s actions more than its stated policies. While the PRC has maintained a “No First Use” policy since the 1960s—contending it will never use a nuclear weapon first—its buildup of advanced capabilities should give us pause. This policy could change in the blink of an eye. Beijing is pursuing capabilities and operating in a manner inconsistent with a minimum deterrent strategy, giving it a full range of options, including limited use and a first-strike capability.”

Why wouldn’t Russia and China view a U.S. NFU policy the same way? It is unlikely that a declaratory policy without significant and verifiable changes in U.S. nuclear force structure and deployments would be meaningful. Keep that in mind when considering how Admiral Richard described the role of nuclear weapons in U.S. warfighting plans: “We must acknowledge the foundational nature of our nation’s strategic nuclear forces, as they create the “maneuver space” for us to project conventional military power strategically.”

Despite entry-into-force of the Treaty on the Prohibition of Nuclear Weapons, an entrenched military-industrial-complex, with nuclear weapons at its core, a reactionary large Republican minority in Congress, and the lack of a visible anti-nuclear movement in the U.S. make fundamental changes to U.S. nuclear weapons policy unlikely for the foreseeable future.

Unfortunately, opposition to the TPNW began before the Trump administration. In October 2016, President Obama’s UN Ambassador, Robert Wood, condemned the TPNW in the General Assembly: “Advocates of a ban treaty say it is open to all, but how can a state that relies on nuclear weapons for its security possibly join a negotiation meant to stigmatize and eliminate them”.

From my point of the view, as a civil society activist, the main value of the TPNW in the United States is as a key “talking point” in public education and advocacy, as we seek to build political power through durable, diverse, multi-issue coalitions, networks, and networks of networks based on our shared commitments to universal, indivisible human security.

Upon EIF of the TPNW, Ambassador Elayne Whyte Gómez of Costa Rica, President of the TPNW negotiations, expressed a similar sentiment, from the perspective of States. Rather than oppose the treaty, she said, the U.S. could use it as a conversation-starter with Russia and China to devise a “new security paradigm” not reliant on mutually assured destruction.