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## Biden's Legacy: the Decline of Arms Control and Disarmament



Trident II (D-5) missile underwater launch. Photo: Department of Defense.

Last month, I reported on the Biden administration's new nuclear doctrine to prepare the United States for a coordinated nuclear challenge from Russia, China, and North Korea. The Biden doctrine revives the concept of "escalation dominance," one of the main drivers of the nuclear arms race between the United States and the Soviet Union in the 1950s and 1960s.

President Biden's neglect of arms control and disarmament means that the next president will inherit a nuclear landscape that is more threatening and volatile than any other since the Cuban missile crisis more than 60 years ago. The Cuban missile crisis, however, was a wake

up call for both President John F. Kennedy and General Secretary Nikita Khrushchev, leading to a series of arms control and disarmament treaties beginning with the Partial Test Ban Treaty of 1963.

We need another wake up call.

Currently, there is little discussion of reviving arms control and disarmament. Instead the mainstream media and many commentators are making the case for additional nuclear weaponry and the modernization of weapons currently in the nuclear arsenal. The influential British newsweekly, *The Economist*, is leading the way in this campaign, arguing that the concept of deterrence demands that the United States build up and modernize its nuclear arsenal. An oped in the *New York Times* this week, written by the chairman of the House Permanent Select Committee on Intelligence, argues that credible deterrence will prevent our adversaries from “even considering a nuclear strike against America or its allies.”

Deterrence requires that nuclear weapons must be in a high state of readiness in order to address the danger of surprise attack, which increases the possibility of unintentional use of nuclear weapons. We need a discussion of alternatives to deterrence, such as negotiations for confidence-building measures as well as arms control and disarmament.

Instead, we are getting a discussion of the need for low-yield nuclear weapons. *The Economist* and others have been making the case for such weapons—20 kilotons of explosive power, roughly Hiroshima-sized—that can be delivered with “extreme precision and less collateral damage.” U.S. think tanks, such as the Center for a New American Security (CNAS), have argued that the “line between low-yield tactical nuclear weapons and precision-guided conventional weapons in terms of their operational effects and perceived impact is blurring,” and that “nuclear arms are more efficient at destroying large-area targets.”

The current discussion is dangerously reminiscent of the nuclear discussion of the 1950s, which was dominated by false notions of a vast Soviet superiority in deployed nuclear ballistic missiles, the so-called “missile gap,” as well as the so-called “bomber gap” regarding strategic aircraft. The conventional wisdom in the defense community was that we were facing a powerful enemy that was undertaking costly efforts to exploit the potential of nuclear weapons in order to gain unchallenged global dominance. Is history about to repeat itself, particularly in view of exaggerated concerns regarding greater threats from both China and North Korea as well as the possibility of Sino-Russian collusion?

Henry Kissinger, the most famous and most controversial American diplomat of the 20th century, was responsible for initiating the idea that nuclear powers could wage a war that

would involve limited use of nuclear weapons. In his “Nuclear Weapons and Foreign Policy,” Kissinger made the case for limited uses of nuclear weapons, which attracted him to Richard Nixon who made Kissinger the national security adviser in 1969. It was fifteen years before a U.S. president—Ronald Reagan— and a Soviet leader—Mikhail Gorbachev— agreed that a “nuclear war cannot be won and must never be fought,” and that the two sides must not “seek to achieve military superiority.” The initiative for these statements originated with Gorbachev, and they received greater attention in Soviet media than in their U.S. counterparts.

Now, we are facing a disturbing situation that finds the United States modernizing its nuclear arsenal at great cost; China ending its doctrine of limited nuclear deterrence and expanding its nuclear arsenal, and Russia threatening the use of tactical nuclear weapons against Ukraine and issuing warnings of a World War III. Russian publications are discussing the possibility of placing a nuclear weapons in space. U.S. defense analysts project that China could have as many as 1,000 nuclear warheads over the next ten years.

Washington’s “Nuclear Employment Guidance” is based on the threat of nuclear coordination between Moscow and Beijing, but there is no evidence of such coordination and it’s unlikely that these former adversaries are formalizing their nuclear and strategic plans. U.S. guidance is based on worst-case analysis, but there needs to be a recognition of similar worst-case analyses in Moscow and Beijing. In view of greatly expanded U.S. defense spending over the past several years as well as the discussion of a strategic missile defense, Russia and China have much to worry about. Even worse, the United States quietly announced in July that it will deploy conventionally armed ground-launched intermediate-range missiles in Germany on a rotational basis beginning in 2026. This is madness.

Iran’s nuclear program is also expanding in size and sophistication, and North Korea has a nuclear arsenal that rivals three nuclear powers—Israel, India, and Pakistan—that were never part of the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty. Iran’s Ayatollah has indicated a readiness to open discussions with the United States on nuclear matters, but the Biden administration has turned a deaf ear to such a possibility. North Korea’s Kim Jong Un has similarly indicated an interest in discussing nuclear matters with the United States.

The only remaining nuclear disarmament treaty—the New START Treaty—expires in February 2026, and there is no indication that U.S. and Russian officials are planning for talks to renew the treaty. The election year predictably finds Kamala Harris and Donald Trump boasting about maintaining and improving U.S. military prowess. Next to nothing is known about Harris’s view of nuclear matters, and the thought of facing a new nuclear age

with Trump back in the White House is positively frightening. We are confronting this difficult situation because the Bush and Trump administrations abrogated two of the most important disarmament treaties in history: the Anti-Ballistic Missile Treaty and the Intermediate Nuclear Forces Treaty.

It's time for the nuclear experts of the nine nuclear powers as well as the general public to read M.G. Sheftall's "Hiroshima: The Last Witnesses." These first-person accounts educate and re-educate the global community on the horrors of Hiroshima and Nagasaki 80 years ago. The accounts of gut-wrenching recollections should be enough to make any sane individual reject the notion of "modernizing" nuclear weapons or discussing "tactical" uses of nuclear weapons.

The danger of nuclear war resulting from an accident, an unauthorized action, the danger of alert practices, or false alarms should never be far from our thinking. Another nuclear arms race in the current international environment would be far more threatening and terrifying than any aspect of the Soviet-American rivalry in the Cold War.

Melvin A. Goodman is a senior fellow at the Center for International Policy and a professor of government at Johns Hopkins University. A former CIA analyst, Goodman is the author of [Failure of Intelligence: The Decline and Fall of the CIA](#) and [National Insecurity: The Cost of American Militarism](#), and [A Whistleblower at the CIA](#). His most recent books are "American Carnage: The Wars of Donald Trump" (Opus Publishing, 2019) and "Containing the National Security State" (Opus Publishing, 2021). Goodman is the national security columnist for [counterpunch.org](http://counterpunch.org).

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