



## US ELECTIONS AND THE FUTURE OF US NUCLEAR WEAPONS POLICY

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*(Views expressed in the brief are those of the author, and do not represent those of ISSI)*



The 2020 US election will be held on November 3, with voters having to choose between incumbent Republican President, Donald Trump, and Democratic challenger Joe Biden. While the build-up to the elections will most likely focus on the COVID-19 pandemic, climate change and the current state of racism in the US, the issue of nuclear disarmament could easily be pushed to the side. Given the vast ideological differences between the two candidates, the result of the 2020 US election will determine future US nuclear weapons policy for years to come.

### President Trump's Nuclear Weapons Policy

Since taking office in January 2017, President Trump has overseen a nuclear weapons policy that was in many ways a massive shift from the typical US approach.

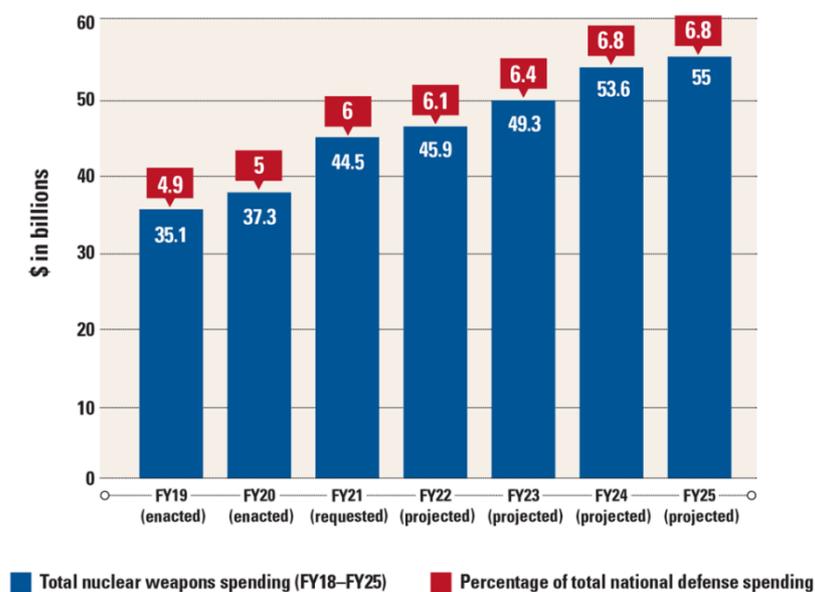
In terms of foreign policy, President Trump has preferred unilateralism over multilateralism. The Trump administration's swift withdrawals from the JCPOA (Iran nuclear deal) and the INF treaty, as well as an imminent withdrawal from the Open Skies Treaty are a reversal of several decades of US belief in international cooperation when it comes to the nuclear arena. A possible withdrawal from the New START and a return to nuclear testing for the first time in 28 years only confirm President Trump's disregard for nuclear disarmament.

President Trump has, on more than one occasion, resorted to a nuclear weapons policy that can only be described as nuclear brinksmanship. He withdrew from the JCPOA in the hopes of forcing Iran

into signing a new deal; a move which almost resulted in a military conflict between the two states. He has used the same tactics, without much success, in the New START negotiations with Russia, where he initially refused to extend the treaty unless China was brought to the table. Indeed, his talks with North Korean Supreme Leader, Kim Jong-un have followed the same pattern after he threatened North Korea with “fire and fury like the world has never seen.”<sup>1</sup>

On the domestic front, President Trump’s nuclear spending is another cause for concern. According to a report by ICAN, the US spent US\$35.4 billion on nuclear weapons in 2019, an increase from the \$29.6 billion spent the previous year.<sup>2</sup> The US nuclear weapon spending in 2019 accounted for almost half of global nuclear spending. A Congressional Budget Office (CBO) report on the *Projected Costs of US Nuclear Forces, 2019 to 2028* shows that if the current trend for nuclear spending is followed, the US nuclear forces would cost US\$494 billion over the next 10 years, US\$94 billion more than CBO’s previous estimate for the 2017-2026 period.<sup>3</sup>

**Total nuclear weapons spending (FY18–FY25) and total nuclear weapons spending as a percentage of total national defense spending**



**Source:** “Surging US Nuclear Weapons Budget a Growing Danger,” Arms Control Association, March 18, 2020, <https://www.armscontrol.org/issue-briefs/2020-03/surging-us-nuclear-weapons-budget-growing-danger>

<sup>1</sup> “Trump Warns North Korea Threats ‘will be met with fire and fury,’” *CNBC*, August 8, 2017, <https://www.cnn.com/2017/08/08/trump-warns-north-korea-threats-will-be-met-with-fire-and-fury.html>

<sup>2</sup> “Enough is Enough: Global Nuclear Weapons Spending 2019,” *International Campaign to Abolish Nuclear Weapons*, accessed September 3, 2020, [https://www.icanw.org/report\\_73\\_billion\\_nuclear\\_weapons\\_spending\\_2020\\_](https://www.icanw.org/report_73_billion_nuclear_weapons_spending_2020_)

<sup>3</sup> “Projected Costs of U.S Nuclear Forces, 2019 to 2028,” Congressional Budget Office, January 2019, <https://www.cbo.gov/system/files/2019-01/54914-NuclearForces.pdf>

This dramatic increase in nuclear spending, however, was simply a continuation of previous US policy of nuclear modernization. The former US President, Barack Obama, had authorized a nuclear modernization of US nuclear triad and production facilities; a program that would cost \$1.2 trillion over 30-years.<sup>4</sup> Therefore, in terms of nuclear spending, President Trump has simply built on the foundation set by his predecessor.

The Trump Administration has also introduced plans to develop and deploy two new types of missiles armed with low-yield nuclear warheads; one a submarine-launched cruise missile and the other a submarine-launched ballistic missile.<sup>5</sup> Another disturbing development was highlighted in the 2018 Nuclear Posture Review, which signalled a change in the US policy by stating that the US could use nuclear weapons in response to “significant non-nuclear strategic attacks,”<sup>6</sup> as opposed to against nuclear attacks only. Such actions lower the threshold of nuclear weapons use and make global cooperation on nuclear disarmament difficult.

It is safe to say that if re-elected in November, President Trump would carry on with the same nuclear weapons policy. This combination of unilateralism, nuclear brinkmanship and increased nuclear spending will only serve to destabilize the global nuclear disarmament regime and increase tensions between major nuclear states. There are already many indications that a modern nuclear arms race is underway, with rapid advancements being made in missile systems, cyber warfare and artificial intelligence, to name a few. Four more years of similar aggressive actions from President Trump would only give major states more incentives to invest in this arms race, which could have disastrous consequences.

### **Joe Biden’s Possible Nuclear Weapons Policy**

If Joe Biden were to win the election in November, one could very well see an attempt to return to many Obama era nuclear weapons policies.

Biden, who was Vice-President during the Obama administration, has been an advocate of nuclear disarmament and non-proliferation for many years. He has stated that he will restore “arms control

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<sup>4</sup> “US Nuclear Arsenal to Cost \$1.2 Trillion Over Next 30 Years: CBO,” *Reuters*, November 1, 2017, <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-usa-nuclear-arsenal-idUSKBN1D030E>

<sup>5</sup> “Biden would Push for less US Reliance on Nukes for Defense,” *ABC News*, September 21, 2020, <https://abcnews.go.com/Politics/wireStory/correction-election-2020-nuclear-strategy-story-73147131>

<sup>6</sup> “Summary of the 2018 Nuclear Posture Review,” *Lawfare*, February 9, 2018, <https://www.lawfareblog.com/summary-2018-nuclear-posture-review>

and non-proliferation as a central pillar of the US global leadership.”<sup>7</sup>He has repeatedly criticized President Trump’s nuclear policies and has vowed to move away from them. Biden called a possible return to nuclear testing by President Trump “as reckless as it is dangerous.”<sup>8</sup>He has stated that he will re-enter, strengthen and extend the JCPOA, while also pursuing an extension of the New START. He is against the deployment of low-yield nuclear warheads and has stated his commitment to a No-First-Use (NFU) policy. While the Biden campaign has not explicitly stated its nuclear weapons policies towards other nuclear weapons states, a shift from President Trump’s policies seems likely.

To what extent a possible Biden administration would be able to overturn President Trump’s nuclear policies though, is still unclear. Re-entering the JCPOA would be no easy feat and a possible Biden administration would only have two weeks to extend the New START after the inauguration. Given President Trump’s unilateralism over the past 4 years, Biden might have to make major concessions to other states for the US to be seen as a global leader again.

Biden’s stance on nuclear modernization and spending, however, is expected to be quite similar to that of President Trump’s. Earlier in 2017, he credited former President Obama’s nuclear modernization program with “setting in motion steps to preserve a safe, secure and effective nuclear deterrent.”<sup>9</sup>He has indicated that he would not cut the Pentagon budgets, and has said: “We have to focus more on unmanned capacity, cyber and IT...some (advisors) have suggested in certain areas the budget is going to have to be increased.”<sup>10</sup>Indeed, nuclear modernization is an issue which has historically had bipartisan support in the US Congress.

When trying to predict what nuclear weapons policy a possible Biden administration might have, it is important to consider the vastly different global environment today than the one under the Obama administration. A resurgent Russia and rapidly growing China mean that the US will find it difficult to cut back on defense spending. Indeed, the 2018 Nuclear Posture Review recognizes this return to

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<sup>7</sup> “US Presidential Candidate Biden Vows to Work Towards Nuke-free World,” *Kyodo News*, August 7, 2020, <https://english.kyodonews.net/news/2020/08/fde0f299de44-us-presidential-candidate-biden-vows-to-work-toward-nuke-free-world.html>

<sup>8</sup> “Biden calls Trump Nuclear Testing Discussion Reckless, Dangerous,” *National Post*, May 28, 2020, <https://nationalpost.com/pmnn/news-pmn/politics-news-pmn/biden-calls-trump-nuclear-testing-discussion-reckless-dangerous>

<sup>9</sup> “The Vice President’s Farewell on Nuclear Security,” *Brookings*, January 17, 2017, <https://www.brookings.edu/blog/order-from-chaos/2017/01/17/the-vice-presidents-farewell-on-nuclear-security/>

<sup>10</sup> “Biden says US must Maintain Small Force in Middle East, has no Plans for Major Defense Cuts,” *Stars and Stripes*, September 10, 2020, <https://www.stripes.com/news/us/biden-says-us-must-maintain-small-force-in-middle-east-has-no-plans-for-major-defense-cuts-1.644631>

great power competition.<sup>11</sup> North Korea and Iran have also stated their desire to build up their nuclear programs. All these factors mean that, if elected President in November, Joe Biden will certainly have a tough time backing up his words when it comes to nuclear disarmament.

## Conclusion

When it comes to the future of both the US and global nuclear weapons policy, the significance of the 2020 US elections cannot be overstated. Both President Trump and former Vice-President Biden have proposed vastly different policies when it comes to nuclear disarmament but mostly agree on the direction the US is going in terms of nuclear modernization and spending. Russia, China and other nuclear states will be eagerly following the upcoming US election, as their future nuclear weapons policies will be affected. The next few years are crucial in terms of global nuclear disarmament, as not only is the global environment constantly changing, but important advancements are being made in terms of emerging technologies. Global cooperation will be necessary now more than ever to navigate these uncharted waters. Whoever occupies the Oval Office come January, be it, Trump or Biden, will certainly have some important decisions to make.

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<sup>11</sup> "Nuclear Posture Review: Recognising the Return to Great Power Competition," *Defense News*, February 4, 2018, <https://www.defensenews.com/opinion/commentary/2018/02/05/nuclear-posture-review-recognizing-the-return-to-great-power-competition/>