



### US APPROACH TOWARDS ARMS CONTROL AND DISARMAMENT UNDER BIDEN ADMINISTRATION

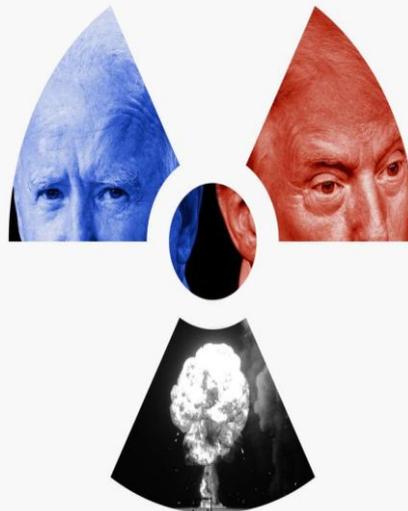
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*(Views expressed in the brief are those of the author, and do not represent those of ISSI)*



**The US arms control and disarmament policy under the Trump administration saw its withdrawal from many arms control and disarmament treaties – both bilateral and multilateral. President Trump was in many ways focused on undoing arms control deals negotiated during the Obama administration. He destroyed decades worth of work done on achieving arms control and disarmament milestones between US and Russia.**

The biggest casualty was the Intermediate Nuclear Forces (INF) Treaty between US and Russia that prohibited the deployment of intermediate range missiles by both the countries. US maintained strategic restraint with Russia for over 30 years. The New START is also due to expire in February 2021. The New Strategic Arms Reduction Treaty (New START) that sets limits on number of deployed strategic missiles could have been further extended for five years but the Trump administration refused to do so, imposing conditions that could not be met. The Trump administration also withdrew from the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA), the deal that was negotiated to impose curbs on Iran's nuclear program. He also chose to withdraw from the Open Skies Treaty that allowed member states to conduct unarmed observation flights over each other's territory. Last but not the least is the President Trump's engagement with North Korea that despite all the fanfare, summits and handshakes failed to make any progress on the denuclearization of the Korean Peninsula. He renewed the focus on developing nuclear weapons, initiated a new nuclear arms race, and eroded the norms against use of nuclear weapons. His administration even talked about resuming nuclear testing.

What needs to be assessed is what President elect, Joseph Biden's policy will be towards arms control and disarmament issues. Can he mend the damage cause by the utter disregard for diplomacy and restraint? Biden Administration will certainly have to move fast if it is to revive US commitment to existing arms control and disarmament arrangements.

The top of the agenda has to be the New START negotiated in 2010 between US and Russia. It limits the number of US and Russian deployed strategic nuclear warheads to 1,550 each. This is the last remaining arms control treaty between US and Russia. If it is allowed to expire in February 2021, there will be no limits on development and deployment of strategic weapons in the decades ahead. New START can easily be extended for up to five years. President-elect, Joseph Biden has pledged to "pursue an extension of the New START, an anchor of strategic stability between the United States and Russia, and use that as a foundation for new arms control arrangements."<sup>1</sup> Russian President Vladimir Putin has already stated on several occasions that he is ready to extend the treaty. In the months leading upto the US elections, both sides engaged in negotiations. The Trump Administration wanted a freeze on new warheads and further verification measures. The US also demanded that China should be made part of the treaty. Thus, US wanted the treaty to be negotiated as a trilateral one. China refused to be drawn into any such treaty due to its small nuclear arsenal that did not compare with US or Russian arsenal. Russia wanted the treaty to be extended in its present form. Because of these factors, an agreement was not reached. Post elections, President-elect Biden will have a very short time to rescue the treaty. But it can be achieved if both sides are willing and no drastic new terms are demanded.

President-elect Joe Biden has promised to rejoin the JCPOA provided "Tehran return to strict compliance with the deal. If it does so, I would rejoin the agreement and use our renewed commitment to diplomacy to work with our allies to strengthen and extend it."<sup>2</sup> Iran's president, Hassan Rouhani and Foreign Minister Mohammad Javad Zarif have sent clear messages that Tehran would be willing to fully comply with the deal if both the US and Europe honor their obligations under the terms of the deal.<sup>3</sup> However, there are fierce opponents of the deal in both the US and Iran and they may have just a few months window to revive the JCPOA between when Biden takes over and when Iranian elections take place in June 2021. While moderate Rouhani backed the negotiation of the JCPOA in 2015, the next Iranian president to be elected in June 2021, would most

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<sup>1</sup> Joseph R. Biden, Jr., "Why America Must Lead Again: Rescuing U.S. Foreign Policy After Trump," *Foreign Affairs*, March/April 2020, <https://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/united-states/2020-01-23/why-america-must-lead-again>

<sup>2</sup> Ibid

<sup>3</sup> "Zarif Says Iran Would Return To Full Nuclear Compliance If US, EU Blink First," *Iran International*, December 3, 2020, <https://iranintl.com/en/world/zarif-says-iran-would-return-full-nuclear-compliance-if-us-eu-blink-first>

likely be from hardliners. They opposed signing the deal originally and would be critical of any moves Rouhani and Zarif make for signing what they perceive as a weak agreement with the US.<sup>4</sup> With hardliners in power in Iran after June 2021, prospects of reviving the deal will diminish. The assassination of top nuclear scientist, Mohsen Fakhrizadeh on November 27 has complicated the situation and bears testament that many forces inside and outside the region would like to scuttle the chances of revival of the nuclear deal. Since the Obama-Biden administration negotiated the JCPOA, there is a good chance Biden would work to revive the deal. However, the clock is ticking to save the JCPOA.

Denuclearization of North Korea is another challenge that faces the new Biden Administration. President Trump followed an unconventional policy on North Korea. The early years of his presidency were occupied with exchanging threatening rhetoric with North Korean leader but over the later years he tried to personally engage Kim Yong Un and met him three times. However, President Trump's unconventional methods did not make any progress on denuclearization of Pyongyang. It was during Trump presidency that North Korea conducted several nuclear and missiles tests and acquired Intercontinental Ballistic Missile capability to reach US mainland. Mr. Biden is expected to pursue a more conventional approach towards negotiating with North Korea, using pressure and what he calls "principled diplomacy".<sup>5</sup> He said, "I will empower our negotiators and jump-start a sustained, coordinated campaign with our allies and others, including China, to advance our shared objective of a denuclearized North Korea."<sup>6</sup> However, the heightened rivalry between the US and China will hamper any efforts to pressure North Korea. Without having China on board, which makes up more than 95% of North Korea's trade volume, any sanctions against the latter would be ineffective. Still, the best approach for Biden may be a multilateral approach to mitigating dangers from North Korean nuclear program.

As regards the Open Skies Treaty, US formally opted out from the Treaty in November 2020 after giving a six month notice in May earlier alleging that the Russia was violating the pact. The US also asserted that the treaty was redundant since the imagery collected during the flights can easily be obtained quickly from US or commercial satellites at a lesser cost. The Treaty, in force since 2002 allows the 34 state parties to conduct short-notice, unarmed, reconnaissance flights over the others' entire territories to collect data on military forces and activities. It was meant as a confidence

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<sup>4</sup> Saeid Jafari, "Biden Needs to Move Fast if He Wants a New Deal With Iran," *Foreign Policy*, December 3, 2020, <https://foreignpolicy.com/2020/12/03/biden-rouhani-zarif-needs-to-move-fast-if-he-wants-a-new-deal-with-iran/>

<sup>5</sup> "With Joe Biden in Charge, No More Flashy Kim Jong Un Summits," *Wall Street Journal*, Nov 15, 2020, Andrew Jeong, <https://www.wsj.com/articles/with-kim-jong-uns-larger-nuclear-arsenal-biden-to-take-a-traditional-approach-11605456000>

<sup>6</sup> Joseph R. Biden, Jr., "Why America Must Lead Again: Rescuing U.S. Foreign Policy After Trump" op.cit

building measure in order to reduce the risk of war. The Trump administration is also taking steps to dispose of the two specially equipped OC-135B planes that were used to conduct the overhead flights. There may still be hope for re-entering the treaty since Biden has opposed withdrawal saying it will, “exacerbate growing tensions between the West and Russia, and increase the risks of miscalculation and conflict.”<sup>7</sup> The treaty can be revived but Biden will have to work hard and fast in order to obtain necessary support within the Senate and Congress. Many Democrats and some Republicans have urged Biden to rejoin the treaty once in office, so there is still hope for the Open Skies Treaty,

Biden is expected to be an ardent supporter of non-proliferation policy. However, would he be able to rescue many treaties that have been terminated and those about to expire remains to be seen. His pre-election iterations certainly give hope: “I will take other steps to demonstrate our commitment to reducing the role of nuclear weapons.....As president, I will renew our commitment to arms control for a new era.”<sup>8</sup>His pre-election statements are promising, but there are many factors that need to be taken into consideration including the international environment of mistrust and hostility that prevails. US relations with China and Russia have nosedived. Also, within the US administration there is certain path dependence. Certain policies that were followed by Trump Administration may not prove easy to reverse. We can expect positive moves on treaties like the New Start, perhaps Open Skies Treaty, and JCPOA. However, there will not be a sea change in the overall direction of the US nuclear weapons and modernization since many of these policies were initiated during the Obama Administration.

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<sup>7</sup> “Trump left the Open Skies Treaty, but don’t write it off yet,” *Defence News*, November 25, 2020, <https://www.defensenews.com/congress/2020/11/25/trump-left-the-open-skies-treaty-but-dont-write-it-off-yet/>

<sup>8</sup> Joseph R. Biden, Jr., “Why America Must Lead Again: Rescuing U.S. Foreign Policy After Trump” op.cit