

TRUMP 2.0: WHAT TO EXPECT ON THE NUCLEAR HORIZON?

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



With Donald Trump’s re-election as the U.S. President, several foreign policy and nuclear policy questions are looming large. Trump’s second term may bring many challenges and perhaps some opportunities for arms control and disarmament. In light of Trump’s previous term as U.S. President and election campaign iterations, it is possible to envisage the future trajectory of the U.S. nuclear policies.

Iran and Nuclear Enrichment

President Donald Trump withdrew from the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA) in 2018¹ even though Iran was adhering to the terms of the agreement. Despite hopes of revival of the JCPOA, the Biden Administration did not make serious efforts to engage Iran. With Trump assuming office again, there is no probability that the Administration would make it a priority. Today, Iran may be closer to developing a nuclear weapon than it would have been if the U.S. had remained engaged in the JCPOA. Arguably, the withdrawal from the JCPOA and subsequently the Biden Administration’s failure to reengage Iran was a diplomatic failure and a blow to the non-proliferation cause.

¹ Mark Landler, “Trump Abandons Iran Nuclear Deal He Long Scorned,” *New York Times*, May 18, 2024, <https://www.nytimes.com/2018/05/08/world/middleeast/trump-iran-nuclear-deal.html>.

Engagement with North Korea

President Trump's engagement with North Korea was stormy, to say the least. The summit in 2018 commenced with much fanfare but ultimately produced nothing substantive.² Trump used his brand of proactive diplomacy to engage with the North Korean leader. However, the reality was that no progress was made towards denuclearizing North Korea. North Korea developed Inter Continental Ballistic Missiles (ICBM) that could hit the U.S. mainland. The Biden Administration did not engage in any negotiations with North Korea. In Trump's second term, more of the same can be expected of what took place in his first term. President Trump may decide to engage in nuclear diplomacy with North Korea. However, with an advanced nuclear and missile programme, with an estimated 50 nuclear warheads and the potential to produce many more,³ North Korea is unlikely to roll back its capabilities. The best that the U.S. can hope to achieve is to manage tensions on the Korean Peninsula.

Arms Control and Disarmament: Prospects of Revival?

The previous Trump Administration exuded disdain for arms control and disarmament efforts. The arms control and disarmament regime suffered many irreparable blows under President Trump's watch. The U.S. withdrew from the 1987 Intermediate Nuclear Forces (INF) that prevented the placement of intermediate-range missiles in Europe. Another casualty was the 1992 Open Skies Treaty that allowed member states to conduct unarmed reconnaissance flights over each other's territories to build confidence by allowing transparency. The U.S. withdrew from the Treaty in 2020 and subsequently Russia also withdrew in December 2021.

Perhaps the biggest arms control casualty would have been the New START, which puts limits on the number of deployed warheads and delivery systems by the U.S. and Russia. It was due for renewal in February 2021; while Russia pushed for renewal, the Trump Administration showed reluctance. The Treaty was rescued when the Biden Administration took over and it was extended for another 5 years till February 2026. For the incoming Trump Administration, the most pressing arms control priority should be the New START with a fast-approaching deadline. New START is the last arms control treaty between Russia and the U.S. If it is not renewed in 2026, it will bring an end to an era of strategic arms control. Both Russia and the U.S. have suspended their participation in

² Kesley Davenport, "Summit Reflects New Attitudes, Old Challenges," *Arms Control Today*, (July/August: 2018), <https://www.armscontrol.org/act/2018-07/news/summit-reflects-new-attitudes-old-challenges>.

³ "Role of Nuclear Weapons grows as Geopolitical Relations Deteriorate - new SIPRI Yearbook out now," SIPRI, June 17, 2024, <https://www.sipri.org/media/press-release/2024/role-nuclear-weapons-grows-geopolitical-relations-deteriorate-new-sipri-yearbook-out-now>.

New START.⁴ The Ukraine conflict has been at the center of the tensions between the U.S. and Russia and has helped precipitate the decline in the New START adherence. The revival of New START could be the litmus test for the Trump Administration and also Russia on managing their strategic relationship and preventing a quantitative arms race. President Trump could score a diplomatic win by salvaging the New START once he takes office. However, there has been a general trend in the last decade or so in the U.S. that shuns formal arms control treaties, a refusal to negotiate any new meaningful treaties and to replace them with a “normative” approach embodied by initiatives like Creating an Environment for Nuclear Disarmament (CEND) put forth in 2019. Moreover, the U.S. threat perception vis-a-vis a rising China means that Washington wants to renegotiate all arms control arrangements to include China as a party.

Russian President Vladimir Putin has shown willingness to engage in strategic stability proposals. He recently said: “We will see how a new future U.S. administration will be formulating its proposals on this matter, if at all.”⁵ On strategic stability, he added, while Russia is ready “it is necessary for the other side to approach it honestly, with due regard for all aspects of relations.”⁶ A lot of the U.S.-Russia engagement on arms control and strategic stability will depend on whether the U.S. pulls back from the Ukraine conflict. When President Trump assumes office, the chances of a turnaround in the U.S. arms control policies are slim. The world would likely see a further erosion in the non-proliferation, arms control, and disarmament regimes.

U.S. Nuclear Weapons and Policies

President Trump initiated several nuclear policies for the U.S. in his first term. It provides a peep in to what he might try in his second term. A new edition of the Nuclear Posture Review (NPR) was launched in 2018. It highlighted the role of nuclear weapons in achieving the U.S. national objectives, deterring nuclear and non-nuclear attacks, and ensuring allies and partners under extended deterrence. Moreover, it highlighted the increasing competition and threat from Russia and China and talked about “devising tailored strategies and flexible responses against contemporary and future threats.”⁷ It also envisaged modernization of the U.S. nuclear infrastructure and capabilities. The Trump Administration also deployed a low-yield Submarine-launched Ballistic Missile (SLBM) as well as initiated a programme to build a new nuclear sea-

⁴ Ghazala Yasmin Jalil, “New START: The Next Arms Control Casualty?” ISSI, Issue Brief, April 20, 2023, <https://issi.org.pk/issue-brief-on-new-start-the-next-arms-control-casualty/>.

⁵ “Russia to look at New US Administration’s Proposals for Strategic Stability – Putin,” *Tass*, November 8, 2024, <https://issi.org.pk/issue-brief-on-new-start-the-next-arms-control-casualty/><https://tass.com/politics/1869307>.

⁶ *Ibid.*

⁷ “Nuclear Posture Review,” February 2018, <https://media.defense.gov/2018/feb/02/2001872886/-1/-1/1/2018-nuclear-posture-review-final-report.pdf>

launched cruise missile.⁸ Even before taking office this time, President-elect Trump has entrusted the Secretary of Defence-designate with the task of preparation of a new NPR, to define the nuclear policy, strategy, and the country's position on the use of nuclear weapons.⁹ The next few months will determine the trajectory of the U.S. nuclear policies. There is every likelihood that Trump will pursue nuclear weapons modernization, introduction of new ones, and a more aggressive posture towards its competitors – Russia and China. As per the Congressional Budget Office, the U.S. nuclear forces will cost US\$756 billion over the next decade. There is Republican support to increase the size and diversity of the U.S. nuclear weapons further to deal with two near-peer nuclear competitors.¹⁰

Also since Trump does not believe in deep commitment to the U.S. alliances, it is likely to imply its allies. Presently the U.S. extends nuclear protection to countries such as Japan, South Korea, and NATO. There are fears that Trump would seek to reduce or eliminate these commitments. Thus, the reliability of the U.S. nuclear umbrella may come into question.¹¹

Nuclear Testing on the Horizon?

The US has conducted 1,030 nuclear tests, the last one in 1992. There has been an on-and-off chatter in the U.S. regarding the resumption of nuclear testing. This chatter was loud during the first Trump Administration. During the earlier Trump term, there were statements in 2018 that the U.S. did not intend to ratify the CTBT. The U.S. also reduced the time line necessary to resume nuclear testing to 6 to 10 months from previous requirement of 24 to 36 months.¹² Also reportedly in May 2020, senior national security officials in Trump administration “discussed the idea of a demonstration U.S. nuclear test explosion to try to intimidate China and Russia at the negotiating table.”¹³ In a recent article in *Foreign Affairs*, the National Security Adviser during the first Trump term, Robert O’Brien, made the case that in order to maintain technical and numerical superiority to China and Russia’s combined nuclear forces, the U.S. needs to resume nuclear testing.¹⁴ There are numerous such examples where nuclear testing was discussed or considered in U.S. high echelons. Thus, in the second Trump term, the world may see a return to nuclear testing. This would bode ill

⁸ Caitlin Talmadge, “How would Trump and Biden handle US nuclear policy upon reelection?” July 8, 2024, <https://www.brookings.edu/articles/how-would-trump-and-biden-handle-us-nuclear-policy-upon-reelection/>

⁹ “Clues on Trump’s Future Nuclear Policy,” <https://www.icip.cat/perlapau/en/article/clues-on-trumps-future-nuclear-policy/>

¹⁰ “Trump Re-Election Introduces New Variables to Nuclear Disarmament Equation,” 14 Nov. 2024, <https://www.armscontrol.org/blog/2024-011/nuclear-disarmament-monitor>

¹¹ “How would Trump and Biden handle US nuclear policy upon reelection?” July 8, 2024

¹² Daryl G. Kimball, “The Looming Threat of Renewed U.S. Nuclear Testing,” *Arms Control Today*, July/August 2024, <https://www.armscontrol.org/act/2024-07/focus/looming-threat-renewed-us-nuclear-testing>

¹³ Ibid

¹⁴ Robert O. Brien, “The Return of Peace Through Strength,” *Foreign Affairs*, July/August 2024, <https://www.foreignaffairs.com/united-states/return-peace-strength-trump-obrien>

for the strategic stability globally. It is likely to start a domino effect whereby other countries would also contemplate nuclear testing. Russia has already de-ratified the 1996 Comprehensive Test Ban Treaty (CTBT) in October 2023 saying it wants to be at par with the U.S. Russia ratified the CTBT in 2000, while the U.S. signed it but did not ratify. While Russia has stated that it has no intention to test, it is likely to do so if the U.S. does. Other countries like China, North Korea, and India may follow suit. The CTBT, although it never entered into force, has maintained the norm against nuclear testing for nearly three decades, and has largely helped prevent horizontal and vertical nuclear proliferation. Nuclear testing by the U.S. will violate the three-decades-long norm against testing and may start a chain reaction of nuclear testing, further plunging the world into chaos and renewed arms races.

Conclusion

If the nuclear policies during Trump's first term are any guide, the world may see a pursuit of new nuclear arms, modernization of existing nuclear arsenal, a softening of the U.S. nuclear umbrella commitments to its close allies, and a resumption of nuclear testing. The nuclear testing by the U.S. may open a Pandora's Box of nuclear testing by others. Moreover, opponents of nuclear testing argue that it is not technologically required or needed, and must be avoided at all costs. Also, President Trump's disdain for formal arms control treaties would mean that the declines in global arms control and disarmament regimes will continue. It remains to be seen how President Trump handles strategic arms control and its relations with China and Russia. Decisions he takes early on in his second term will decide the course of the United States' nuclear policies, strategic stability dialogue with Russia, and its strategic relations with China.