

January 2023

OCCASIONAL
PAPER

Volume 3, Number 1

Assessing the Biden Administration's “Big Four” National Security Guidance Documents

Christopher A. Ford



NATIONAL INSTITUTE FOR PUBLIC POLICY

**Assessing the Biden Administration's
"Big Four" National Security
Guidance Documents**

Christopher A. Ford

National Institute Press®

Published by
National Institute Press®
9302 Lee Highway, Suite 750
Fairfax, Virginia 22031

Copyright © 2023 by National Institute Press®

All rights reserved. No part of this book may be reprinted or reproduced or utilized in any form or by an electronic, mechanical or other means, now known or hereafter invented, including photocopying, and recording or in any information storage or retrieval system, without permission in writing from the publisher. The views expressed in this *Occasional Paper* are those of the author alone and do not represent any institution with which he is or has been affiliated.

National Institute for Public Policy would like to thank the Sarah Scaife Foundation for the generous support that made this *Occasional Paper* possible.

Cover design by Stephanie Koeshall.

Table of Contents

Executive Summary	v
Introduction	1
Posture, Posturing, and National Security Strategy	2
The Biden Administration Abandons its Disarmament Dreams.....	5
And Yet Still Inadequate	20
Areas for Bipartisan Cooperation.....	28
Conclusion	36
About the Author.....	39

Executive Summary

This *Occasional Paper* explores the content and implications of the Biden Administration's new national security guidance documents: the National Security Strategy (NSS), the National Defense Strategy (NDS), the Nuclear Posture Review (NPR), and the Missile Defense Review (MDR). To begin with, it argues that the NSS suffers from structural weaknesses that undermine its utility as a guide for focusing strategic planning, prioritization, and the allocation of scarce resources. It is unfocused and undisciplined, and seeks to import a range of politically controversial elements of Biden's domestic agenda into the discussion as "national security" objectives in ways that undermine the prospects for implementing consistent U.S. national security strategy with bipartisan support over time. Whatever one thinks of the particular measures advocated in that sprawling document, it is neither a very useful guide to strategic prioritization even within the Biden Administration nor a recipe for the effective implementation of security strategy over time vis-à-vis our strategic competitors.

Nevertheless, one of the most striking things about these new documents is the degree to which the Biden administration now seems to admit that the "hawks" in the U.S. national security policy community read the strategic environment right after all. This is especially the case where it comes to calling out nuclear weapons threats from great power challengers that make further disarmament progress impossible without dramatic changes in strategic policy by those challengers. The Biden documents point to the same dangerous and destabilizing geopolitical phenomena that the Trump Administration flagged in 2017 and 2018, detailing accelerating nuclear and other military threats, and making clear that "the post-Cold War era is definitively

over and a competition is underway among the major powers to shape what comes next.”

The Biden Administration’s acknowledgment of the dramatically worsening strategic environment, moreover, repudiates much of President Obama’s (and Biden’s own prior) disarmament agenda. The Biden NPR also makes clear that no one should expect further disarmament progress anytime soon, and also that the United States has lost patience with trying to “lead” a world so obviously unwilling to follow it toward such disarmament. If there is to be a chance for resuming post-Cold War progress disarmament, the Biden documents make clear, the burden now lies on China and Russia to turn things around by stopping their escalatory provocations. The NPR pledges to maintain nuclear forces that are “responsive to the threats we face,” even as that document details how the nuclear threats we face are growing. One way or the other – whether one feels regret at the demise of a noble dream or relief at an awakening from naïve delusion – it seems hard to contest the point that the disarmament agenda has clearly now run out of steam even for Obama Administration veterans. Joe Biden’s NPR, one might say, is thus where the “Prague Speech” goes to die.

But despite this repudiation of Vice President Biden’s disarmament enthusiasms, President Biden’s strategic guidance still falls short in the response it describes to the “accelerating” threats we face. If anything, these documents may downplay these nuclear threats, as recent revelations about China’s nuclear program suggest. Yet having promised to “maintain nuclear forces that are responsive to the threats we face,” when it comes to actual nuclear weapons systems, the Biden NPR either simply continues the status quo (“Triad” recapitalization) or actually cuts programs (the submarine-launched cruise missile and the B83-1 gravity bomb). Almost by its own

admission, therefore, the Biden Administration's nuclear strategy falls short of its own promises.

On a more positive note, though the United States is still lamentably behind where it needs to be in recapitalizing the nuclear weapons production infrastructure upon which deterrence depends, the Biden NPR says creditable things in response. Specifically, it pledges to build "a resilient and adaptive nuclear security enterprise" to provide a "modern weapons and a modern infrastructure" and "produce weapons required in the near-term and beyond" and to "adapt to additional or new requirements" as needed. One hopes it means this, and that the U.S. policy community can come together to ensure success.

One of the key organizing concepts of the Biden Administration's NDS is the idea of "integrated deterrence" – a "holistic response" that aligns a maximally broad range of U.S. policies, investments, and activities to sustain and strengthen deterrence that works "seamlessly across warfighting domains, theaters, the spectrum of conflict, all instruments of national power, and our network of Alliances and partnerships." It is not a novel idea to argue that we should effectively and dynamically weave together all elements of national power to be better at deterring aggression. But it is a good idea nonetheless, and the NDS is certainly right that we need more effective and truly "holistic" deterrence-focused policymaking than our system has yet been able to produce.

A similar point can be made about the idea of "campaigning," another key organizing concept for the NDS. Said to mean "the deliberate effort to synchronize the Department's activities and investments to aggregate forces and resources to shift conditions in our favor" in the operational environment, so as to "focus on the most consequential competitor activities that, if left unaddressed, would endanger our military advantages now and in the future," campaigning is both commonsensical and likely

still to be very challenging. It will demand much of us in bureaucratic, organizational, data-analytical, leadership, and decision-process terms. As with deterrence, however, doing such campaigning in a more genuinely integrated and holistic way would be of great value.

There is thus much in these “Big Four” documents to criticize, and yet also much to praise. There are also some areas of considerable importance on which the entire U.S. policy community – even in this age of polarization – can hopefully come together to drive much-needed change.

Introduction

The following pages explore the content and the implications of the Biden Administration's new "Big Four" national security guidance documents, which after a remarkable period of delay were publicly released in unclassified form in October 2022: the *National Security Strategy* (NSS),¹ the *National Defense Strategy* (NDS), the *Nuclear Posture Review* (NPR), and the *Missile Defense Review* (MDR) – the last three of which were published by the U.S. Department of Defense in one long, consolidated document.²

The first portion of this paper will offer some framing thoughts upon the weakness of the NSS as a guide specifically to strategic prioritization in U.S. national security strategy. The second will walk through some of the remarkable ways in which – despite some choices that *don't* conduce to security and deterrence – the new Biden Administration documents go remarkably far in repudiating the soaring nuclear disarmament ambitions proclaimed by the Obama Administration, and in fact adopt a good many nuclear weapons policies that might just as well have been cribbed from their Trump Administration versions. Thereafter, the paper will briefly discuss some important areas flagged in the Biden security documents on which it may be very useful to focus bipartisan policy community attention in order to help the United States meet

¹ The White House, *National Security Strategy* (October 2022), available at <https://www.whitehouse.gov/wp-content/uploads/2022/10/Biden-Harris-Administrations-National-Security-Strategy-10.2022.pdf>.

² U.S. Department of Defense, "2022 *National Defense Strategy of the United States of America, Including the 2022 Nuclear Posture Review and the 2022 Missile Defense Review* (October 2022), available at <https://media.defense.gov/2022/Oct/27/2003103845/-1/-1/1/2022-NATIONAL-DEFENSE-STRATEGY-NPR-MDR.PDF>.

strategic competition and nuclear and broader deterrence challenges in the years ahead.

Posture, Posturing, and National Security Strategy

To begin with, it must be pointed out that the Biden Administration's NSS suffers from a structural weakness that significantly undermines its utility in performing its most critical function. A "National Security Strategy" is surely supposed to serve as an overall guide for how to focus strategic planning, prioritization, and the allocation of scarce resources of time, energy, attention, and funding across all the national security organs of the federal government. Yet the 2022 NSS seems notably unfocused and undisciplined, to the point of wild profligacy, in the proliferation of what it feels compelled to flag as national security priorities.

It is not merely that portions of the NSS contradict President Biden's own approaches – though some do. The document, for instance, urges Americans to "reckon openly and humbly with our divisions" [p.7] and to resist efforts to "polarize societies." [p.18] Yet the president himself has loudly described anyone who doesn't support his domestic political agenda as "a threat to our personal rights, to the pursuit of justice, to the rule of law, to the very soul of this country" and "to ... democracy itself."³

More importantly, the NSS often seems conspicuously unable to prioritize and focus upon critical national security

³ "Remarks by President Biden on the Continued Battle for the Soul of the Nation" (September 1, 2022) (describing Republicans who do not support the "right to choose, [the] right to privacy, [the] right to contraception, [and the] right to marry who you love"), available at <https://www.whitehouse.gov/briefing-room/speeches-remarks/2022/09/01/remarks-by-president-bidenon-the-continued-battle-for-the-soul-of-the-nation/>.

challenges. In fact, it seeks to import a range of politically controversial elements of Biden's *domestic* agenda into the discussion as "national security" objectives in ways that not only undermine the prospects for actually *implementing* a consistent U.S. national security strategy with meaningful bipartisan support over time, but that also sometimes blur the focus of the NSS so much that it can be difficult to see how the document could provide much guidance for national security prioritization at all.

To be sure, in discussing challenges in the global environment, it is not incorrect for the NSS to observe that problems such as "climate change, food insecurity, communicable diseases, terrorism, energy shortages, or inflation" [p.6] can have national security implications. (Nor is it surprising to see the Biden Administration's NSS declare that "[o]f all of the shared problems we face, climate change is the greatest and potentially existential for all nations." [p.9]) It is important, however, to resist the temptation to describe *everything* one wants as a "national security" imperative, because then, in effect, *nothing* really is – and there is no way to think intelligibly about strategic prioritization.⁴

Nevertheless, the list of policy agenda items – and, furthermore, what are often *domestic* policy agenda items – that make their way into the "national security" priorities of the NSS is quite staggering. Liberalizing U.S. immigration policy, for instance, makes an appearance.⁵ [pp.15-16] And,

⁴ It appears not to have occurred to the drafters of the NSS, moreover, that they should be careful about identifying "inflation" as a national security challenge, lest President Biden have to mobilize the national security bureaucracy against his own economic team and the U.S. Congress his party controls.

⁵ There is also in the NSS an enigmatic reference to the problem of "irregular migration" [p.19] [*emphasis added*], which – in conjunction with the document's reference to the "unique strategic advantage" for the United States presented by "immigrants seeking opportunity and

because “[g]lobal action begins at home,” so also does “making unprecedented generational investments in the clean energy” and “creating millions of good paying jobs and strengthening American industries.” [p.27]

According to the NSS, moreover, it is also a U.S. national security priority to “overcome[e] inequities in [health] care quality and access” [p.28], to “advance commonsense gun laws and policies” [p.31], and to address “the crisis of disinformation and misinformation ... channeled through social and other media platforms.” [p.31] We must also, it is said, fix longstanding economic rules and policies that “privilege corporate mobility over workers and the environment, thereby exacerbating inequality and the climate crisis” [p.34] and “ensure durable and inclusive economic growth that delivers for our working people.” [p.40] And this, it is explained, means we must adopt policies “encouraging robust trade, countering anticompetitive practices, bringing worker voices to the decision-making table, and ensuring high labor and environmental standards.” [p.34]

Additionally, the NSS proclaims the importance of “[p]rioritizing diversity, equity, inclusion, and accessibility to ensure [that] national security institutions reflect the American public they represent.” [p.46] This includes: “promoting diversity and inclusion; intensifying our suicide prevention efforts; eliminating the scourges of sexual assault, harassment, and other forms of violence, abuse, and discrimination; and rooting out violent extremism” within the Department of Defense. [p.21]

The NSS promises, also, to “protect and promote voting rights and expand democratic participation ... building on the work of generations of activists to advance equity and root out systemic disparities in our laws, policies, and institutions.” [p.16] U.S. national security strategy will thus,

refuge on our shores” [p.15] - might be taken to signal a desire for more *regular* migration.

among other things, “invest in women and girls, [and] be responsive to the voices and focus on the needs of the most marginalized, including the LGBTQI+ community.” [p.20]

In short, the reader of the Biden Administration’s new NSS might be forgiven for concluding that it is a “national security” imperative for the United States to implement the entire domestic policy agenda of the progressive wing of the Democrat Party. Whatever one thinks of the particular measures advocated in that sprawling document, therefore, this is surely neither a useful guide to strategic prioritization even *within* the Biden Administration *nor* a recipe for the effective and constructive implementation of security strategy over time vis-à-vis our strategic competitors. Despite the commendably strong things said in these “Big Four” Biden strategy documents about the imperative of successful strategic competition against China and Russia (see below), Xi Jinping and Vladimir Putin will surely be delighted if we devote our energies to squabbling amongst ourselves over a diffuse “national security” agenda of performative progressivism rather than to countering those dictators’ geopolitical depredations.

The Biden Administration Abandons its Disarmament Dreams

Belated Recognition of Great Power Competitive Threats

When it comes to discussions in these documents about matters that unquestionably *are* national security concerns, however, some creditable things are indeed said. In fact, one of the most striking things about these new Biden strategy documents is the degree to which the current administration – populated as it is by so many veterans of the Obama Administration’s self-described emphasis upon

trying to lead the way to nuclear disarmament⁶ – now seems admit that the “hawks” in the U.S. national security policy community basically read the strategic environment right after all. This is especially the case where it comes to calling out nuclear weapons threats from great power challengers that make further disarmament progress impossible without dramatic changes in strategic policy by those challengers.

The Biden Administration seems to prefer the term “strategic competition” to the “great power competition” often discussed by Trump Administration officials. And they do not use the term “revisionist” to describe Chinese and Russian geopolitical ambitions as did Trump Administration in its NSS of 2017⁷ – though the new Biden NSS [p.8] and the new NPR [p.4] both use the term “revisionist” specifically in describing Russian policy. But the new documents make it quite clear that the Biden team sees these competitors the same way. The Biden documents all unmistakably point to the same dangerous and destabilizing geopolitical phenomena that the Trump NSS flagged in 2017 – and that the Trump NDS emphasized in 2018⁸ – in making clear that great power competition is unfortunately once again the central challenge for U.S. security strategy. As made clear in the new NSS, the Biden

⁶ See, e.g., “Remarks by President Obama In Prague as Delivered” (April 5, 2009), available at <https://obamawhitehouse.archives.gov/the-press-office/remarks-president-barack-obama-prague-delivered>.

⁷ The White House, *National Security Strategy of the United States of America* (December 2017), available at <https://trumpwhitehouse.archives.gov/wp-content/uploads/2017/12/NSS-Final-12-18-2017-0905.pdf>.

⁸ U.S. Department of Defense, *Summary of the 2018 National Defense Strategy of the United States of America* (2018) [hereinafter “National Security Strategy 2017”], available at <https://dod.defense.gov/Portals/1/Documents/pubs/2018-National-Defense-Strategy-Summary.pdf>.

Administration now agrees with the Trump team: “the post-Cold War era is definitively over and a competition is underway between the major powers to shape what comes next.” [p.6]

Indeed, the Biden NSS begins with a letter from President Biden describing the global arena as being characterized by “strategic competition to shape the future of the international order.” Nor does the body of the underlying document mince many words in this regard:

The most pressing strategic challenge facing our vision is from powers that layer authoritarian governance with a revisionist foreign policy. It is their behavior that poses a challenge to international peace and stability—especially waging or preparing for wars of aggression, actively undermining the democratic political processes of other countries, leveraging technology and supply chains for coercion and repression, and exporting an illiberal model of international order. [p.8]

In this strategic competition, the NSS declares, “Russia poses an immediate threat to the free and open international system, recklessly flouting the basic laws of the international order today, as its brutal war of aggression against Ukraine has shown.” [p.8] The Kremlin, in fact, “has chosen to pursue an imperialist foreign policy with the goal of overturning key elements of the international order.” [p.25]

But the most sustained attention, from a strategic competition perspective, is devoted to China. “The People’s Republic of China,” President Biden notes in his letter opening the 2022 NSS,

... harbors the intention and, increasingly, the capacity to reshape the international order in favor of one that tilts the global playing field to its benefit,

even as the United States remains committed to managing the competition between our countries responsibly. Russia's brutal and unprovoked war on its neighbor Ukraine has shattered peace in Europe and impacted stability everywhere, and its reckless nuclear threats endanger the global non-proliferation regime. Autocrats are working overtime to undermine democracy and export a model of governance marked by repression at home and coercion abroad.

Clearly seen as being more dangerous than Russia over the long term, China is described by the NSS as "the only competitor with both the intent to reshape the international order and, increasingly, the economic, diplomatic, military, and technological power to advance that objective." [p.8] Competition with China, moreover,

... is also increasingly global. Around the world, the contest to write the rules of the road and shape the relationships that govern global affairs is playing out in every region and across economics, technology, diplomacy, development, security, and global governance. [p.24]

The NSS thus promises to "prioritize maintaining an enduring competitive edge over the PRC while constraining a still profoundly dangerous Russia." [p.23]

Providing more detail, the Biden NDS describes how our strategic competitors are using nuclear capabilities, emergent technologies, doctrines, and threats to "erode deterrence, exert economic coercion, and endanger the political autonomy of states." [p.4] In this, China is said to be our most important challenge, and Beijing is described as using "increasingly coercive actions to reshape the Indo-Pacific region and the international system to fit its authoritarian preferences." [p.4] The NDS also describes Russia as an "acute threat." [p.5] (Among other things, in

fact, the NPR notes – in terms not unlike ones this author has been using publicly since at least 2016⁹ – that the Russians have been using their nuclear arsenal as “a shield behind which to wage unjustified aggression against their neighbors.” [p.1])

The NPR also describes in somewhat alarming detail how these nuclear threats are increasing. According to the NPR, both our strategic competitors are continuing to diversify and expand their nuclear arsenals. China is said to intend to have “at least 1,000 deliverable nuclear warheads” by the end of this decade [p.4], and “increasingly will be able to execute a range of nuclear strategies to advance its goals.” [p.5] Beijing is “increasing its capability to threaten the United States and our Allies and partners with nuclear weapons” [p.11], and “[t]he range of nuclear options available to the PRC leadership will expand in the years ahead.” [p.11] China also has “plans for expanding fissile material production to support its growing arsenal.” [p.17]

Meanwhile, the NPR notes, “Russia continues to emphasize nuclear weapons in its strategy, modernize and expand its nuclear forces, and brandish nuclear weapons in support of its revisionist security policy.” [p.4] Indeed, the document notes, “[b]y the 2030s the United States will, for the first time in its history, face *two* major nuclear powers as strategic competitors and potential adversaries” [*emphasis added*]. [p.4]

⁹ See, e.g., Christopher Ford, “Offensive Nuclear Umbrellas and the Modern Challenge of Strategic Thinking,” remarks to the Congressional Nuclear Security Working Group (February 10, 2016), available at <https://www.newparadigmsforum.com/p2007>.

Responses to the Threat

Death of the Disarmament Agenda

The Biden Administration's acknowledgment of this dramatically worsening strategic environment – something to which we, of course, drew conspicuous attention in the Trump Administration's NSS, NDS, and NPR – repudiates much of President Obama's (and Joe Biden's own prior) disarmament agenda.

To be sure, there is in the NPR the politically obligatory swing back toward rhetorical support for the Comprehensive Test Ban Treaty (CTBT). It is very likely that the growing nuclear threats the NPR describes will make CTBT ratification even more impossible than before, however, since legally limiting U.S. weapons development options indefinitely will be perceived in Congress as *especially* unwise now that both of our primary competitors are building up their arsenals and China may be striking out for nuclear parity, or more.

Making the prospects of ratification still dimmer, moreover, the NPR also calls out “nuclear test site activities of concern” by Russia and China that need to be addressed [p.18] – an awkward reference, of course, to the very real possibility that while the United States has scrupulously observed a “zero-yield” moratorium on nuclear explosive testing ever since 1992, both our strategic competitors might have been conducting secret yield-producing tests.¹⁰ This problem was first raised publicly by U.S. officials under the

¹⁰ See, e.g., Assistant Secretary of State Christopher Ford, “Russian Arms Control Compliance: A Report Card, 1984-2020,” U.S. Department of State, *Arms Control and International Security Papers*, vol. 1, no. 10 (June 18, 2020), at 8, available at <https://irp-cdn.multiscreensite.com/ce29b4c3/files/uploaded/ACIS%20Paper%2010%20-%20Russian%20Arms%20Control%20Compliance.pdf>.

Trump Administration,¹¹ and the new NPR represents the Biden Administration's concession that, yes, there *are* real worries here – not only about what Russia and China are currently doing despite their ostensible “moratoria” on nuclear testing, and what strategic advantage such covert testing might gain them while the U.S. refrains, but also about whether they would comply with the CTBT even if it were to enter into force.

The NPR also voices support for a Fissile Material Cutoff Treaty (FMCT) [p.19], but also signals the improbability of such a treaty by noting a few paragraphs later that China has “plans for expanding fissile material production to support its growing arsenal.” [p.17] For the arms control crowd, this head-nod toward two seemingly crippled instruments is surely pretty thin performative gruel.

Even when effectively bragging about canceling the Submarine-Launched Cruise Missile-Nuclear (SLCM-N), however, the Biden NPR justifies its move on the grounds that that SLCM-N was not needed because the W76-2 low-yield submarine-launched warhead – a Trump Administration innovation that Democrats denounced at the time as “misguided and dangerous”¹² nuclear warmongering – “currently provides an important means to deter limited nuclear use.” [p.20] It seems likely that President Biden's anti-nuclear constituents are happy to see

¹¹ See, e.g., U.S. Department of State, *Adherence to and Compliance with Arms Control, Nonproliferation, and Disarmament Agreements and Commitments* (August 2019), at 39-40, available at <https://www.state.gov/wp-content/uploads/2019/08/Compliance-Report-2019-August-19-Unclassified-Final.pdf>.

¹² See, e.g., Shannon Bugos, “U.S. Deploys Low-Yield Nuclear Warhead,” *Arms Control Association* (March 2020) (quoting Adam Smith [D-Wash.], Chairman of the Armed Services Committee in the U.S. House of Representatives), available at <https://www.armscontrol.org/act/2020-03/news/us-deploys-low-yield-nuclear-warhead>.

SLCM-N go, but canceling the cruise missile *because the Trump nuclear team already did such a good job at responding to Russian and Chinese deployments with a new nuclear weapons program* is probably not precisely what those constituents were hoping to hear.

Even on arms control – where the Biden Administration tries hard to distinguish itself rhetorically from its predecessor by promising a “renewed emphasis” that will “put diplomacy first” [p.16] – the Biden NPR seems merely to whimper where it tries to roar. What is the NPR’s arms control agenda? To “prepare for engagement and realistic outcomes” on arms control. [p.16] This is strikingly far from actually *anticipating* any sort of engagement, let alone any kind of outcome, or having any particular plan for how to move forward.

To be sure, the Biden Administration calls for discussions with China on reducing strategic risk, and proclaims itself “ready to engage the PRC” on such topics. [p.17] Yet that’s hardly particularly forward-leaning compared to the Trump Administration’s own repeated calls for arms control negotiations with China,¹³ and the written invitation urging the resumption of the bilateral Sino-American strategic stability dialogue that this author

¹³ See, e.g., Franco Ordonez, “Trump’s Push for Lofty Nuclear Treaty Sparks Worry Over Current Deal,” NPR (January 1, 2020), available at <https://www.npr.org/2020/01/01/792725906/trumps-push-for-lofty-nuclear-treaty-sparks-worry-over-current-deal>; Assistant Secretary of State Christopher Ford, “U.S. Priorities for ‘Next-Generation Arms Control,’” U.S. Department of State, *Arms Control and International Security Papers*, vol. 1, no. 1 (April 6, 2020), available at <https://irp-cdn.multiscreensite.com/ce29b4c3/files/uploaded/ACIS%20Paper%201%20-%20Next-Gen%20Arms%20Control.pdf>; Jack Detsch, “Trump Wants China on Board With New Nuclear Pact,” *Foreign Policy* (July 23, 2020), available at <https://foreignpolicy.com/2020/07/23/trump-china-russia-new-arms-control-agreement-start/>.

sent to his Chinese counterpart in December 2019 – and to which China did not bother to reply.¹⁴

Indeed, with their myriad nuclear and other military threats, Russia and China seem even to have talked Joe Biden out of what was once a signature nuclear agenda item of his own – and for which he voiced support when leaving office as Vice President in January 2017¹⁵ – the claim that the “sole purpose” of nuclear weapons should be to deter the use of other nuclear weapons. (In President Obama’s 2010 NPR, moreover, a “sole purpose” posture had been described as an aspiration no fewer than *six* times.¹⁶) Today, the Biden NPR still observes only that the “*fundamental role*” [emphasis added] of nuclear weapons is to deter nuclear attack.” [p.9]. Of “sole purpose,” in fact, the Biden team can still say only that they have “the goal of moving toward a sole purpose declaration.” [p.9] (They cannot even claim, in other words, actually to *be* moving toward “sole purpose”: they just hope to *start* moving in that direction at some point.)

In place of “sole purpose,” in fact, the Biden NPR actually adopts the *Trump Administration’s* emphasis upon explicitly making it part of U.S. declaratory policy that nuclear weapons also have a role in deterring what the 2018 Trump NSS called “significant non-nuclear strategic

¹⁴ Ford, “U.S. Priorities for ‘Next-Generation Arms Control,’” supra, at 2.

¹⁵ “Remarks by the Vice President on Nuclear Security” (January 11, 2017) (“we made a commitment to create the conditions by which the sole purpose of nuclear weapons would be to deter others from launching a nuclear attack”), available at <https://obamawhitehouse.archives.gov/the-press-office/2017/01/12/remarks-vice-president-nuclear-security>.

¹⁶ See U.S. Department of Defense, *Nuclear Posture Review Report* (April 2010) [hereinafter “2010 NPR”], at viii, ix, 16, 17, 47, & 48, available at https://dod.defense.gov/Portals/1/features/defenseReviews/NPR/2010_Nuclear_Posture_Review_Report.pdf.

attack”¹⁷ – threats that this author also made clear, when performing the duties of the Under Secretary of State for Arms Control and International Security,¹⁸ could include a sufficiently devastating cyberattack upon critical infrastructure or an attack upon critical space assets. Given all the criticism from the Left¹⁹ that this Trump Administration formulation provoked in 2018, the Biden NPR makes its agreement remarkably clear. Nuclear weapons, it says, are needed to help deter not merely the use of other nuclear weapons, but also “other high consequence, strategic level attacks.” [p.8] Indeed, the NPR actually makes this point *several* times for emphasis, noting variously that nuclear weapons have a role in “detering attacks that have strategic effect against the United States or its Allies and partners” [p.9], in deterring “attacks with non-nuclear means that could produce devastating effects” [p.9], and in deterring “existing and emerging non-nuclear threats with potential strategic effect.” [p.8]

(Incidentally, both the Biden Administration’s NDS [pp.1 & 8-10] and NPR [pp.3, 10-12, & 14-15] make repeated references to the importance of ensuring that deterrence is “tailored” to the particular adversary and set of circumstances in question. This should be music to the ears of Keith Payne – a key contributor to both the George W. Bush Administration’s 2001 NPR and the 2018 NPR, and who has been promoting the concept of “tailored

¹⁷ See National Security Strategy 2017, *supra*, at 21.

¹⁸ Assistant Secretary of State Christopher Ford, “International Security in Cyberspace: New Models for Reducing Risk,” U.S. Department of State, *Arms Control and International Security Papers*, vol. 1, no. 20 (October 20, 2020), at 2, available at <https://irp-cdn.multiscreensite.com/ce29b4c3/files/uploaded/ACIS%20Paper%2020%20--%20Cyberspace.pdf>.

¹⁹ See, e.g., Arms Control Association, “The New U.S. Nuclear Strategy is Flawed and Dangerous. Here’s Why.” *Issue Briefs*, vol. 10, no. 3 (February 15, 2018), available at <https://www.armscontrol.org/issue-briefs/2018-02/new-us-nuclear-strategy-flawed-dangerous-heres-why>.

deterrence” for decades²⁰ – and illustrates once more how much the U.S. nuclear “doves” have had to learn from the “hawks” as Russian and Chinese revisionist threats have accelerated.)

Even when the NPR seems to try to make a pro-disarmament gesture in deciding to “[e]liminate ‘hedge against an uncertain future’ as a formal role of nuclear weapons” [p.3], the knowledgeable observer can read the writing on the wall. “Hedging” phrasing dates back to the first NPR under the Clinton Administration,²¹ in which the United States sought to “lead and hedge” – that is, to *lead* the way toward nuclear disarmament but *hedge* against unexpected threats along that path by keeping more nuclear capability than was actually needed at any given time, in case things turn out to be more challenging than expected.²²

²⁰ See, e.g., Keith B. Payne, “Nuclear Deterrence in a New Era: Applying ‘Tailored Deterrence,’” National Institute for Public Policy, *Information Series*, no. 431 (May 21, 2018), available at <https://nipp.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/03/IS-431.pdf>.

²¹ See, e.g., U.S. Department of Defense, “DOD Review Recommends Reduction in Nuclear Force” (September 22, 1994), available at <https://missilethreat.csis.org/wp-content/uploads/2022/01/1994-NPR-News-Release-Slides-Clinton.pdf>.

²² See, e.g., Arms Control Association, “Parsing the Nuclear Posture Review” (undated) (quoting Janne Nolan that that the 1994 NPR “commit[ted] the United States to one ‘innovation’: establishing a hedge force. Whatever reductions were to be taken in the nuclear arsenal, according to this policy, we would have to have the ability to reload up to 100 percent of the downloaded force in the event that Russia returned to adversarial status or in the event that there was the ascendance of other so-called peer competitors”), available at https://www.armscontrol.org/act/2002_03/panelmarch02; Steve Coll & David B. Ottaway, “A Changing Nuclear Order,” *Washington Post* (April 9, 1995) (noting that President Clinton’s Presidential Decision Directive 15 [PDD-15] “endorsed a specific program to preserve U.S. nuclear weapon capabilities in the years ahead, to maintain current nuclear forces and to hedge against unfavorable changes in global politics”), available at

The philosophy of “hedging,” in other words, was an artifact of the early post-Cold War era’s presumed teleology of driving to an eventual “Zero.” It represented the Clinton Administration’s answer to the challenge of pursuing the dream of disarmament without seeming too irresponsible a steward of U.S. national security interests along the way. And indeed, “lead and hedge” received broad support²³ from the U.S. nuclear weapons policy community for many years thereafter.

Until now, apparently. In place of that *old* concept of hedging against the possibility that the future will prove bumpier than hoped, the Biden Administration basically adopts a new one that simply avoids using the word. The 2022 NPR still declares that the U.S. nuclear weapons production infrastructure must be able to deliver “credible deterrence even in the face of significant uncertainties and unanticipated challenges.” [p.7] As will be discussed further in a moment, after describing how nuclear threats from our great power adversaries are increasing, the NPR also promises to maintain a “flexible stockpile” capable of “pacing” strategic challenges by “respond[ing] in a timely way to threat developments” and “produce weapons required in the near-term and beyond” so as to “adapt to additional or new requirements.” [p.23] Hedging is dead; long live hedging.

Yet with the retirement of the *specific* “hedge” phrasing that for so long carefully connoted cautious optimism along an assumed road of disarmament progress from the Clinton

<https://www.washingtonpost.com/archive/politics/1995/04/09/a-changing-nuclear-order/331d16c1-24a1-487d-91a6-3e85540dce28/>.

²³ See, e.g., Strategic Posture Review Commission, *America’s Strategic Posture: Final Report of the Congressional Commission on the Strategic Posture of the United States* (Washington, D.C.: U.S. Institute of Peace, 2009), at xi, xii, xvi, & 8-9, available at https://www.usip.org/sites/default/files/file/strat_posture_report_a_dv_copy.pdf.

era to Barack Obama's "Prague Speech" of April 2009,²⁴ one also sees the implicit retirement of its longstanding cohabitant: the idea of the United States "leading" disarmament. The Biden NPR does stress the need to "work with a sense of urgency to create a security environment that would ultimately allow for the[] elimination" of nuclear weapons. [p.2] Nevertheless, other portions of the document make quite clear that nobody should wait by the phone for any particular progress in this regard, and also that the United States has lost patience with trying to "lead" a world so obviously unwilling to follow us toward disarmament.²⁵

Any resumed progress toward disarmament, the NPR notes, would require major changes in the "security environment." [p.2] Specifically, "major changes in the role of nuclear weapons in our strategies for the PRC and Russia will require verifiable reductions or constraints on their

²⁴ "Remarks by President Obama In Prague as Delivered," *supra*.

²⁵ There is another potential interpretation of the Biden Administration's decision to stop referring to "hedging," however. As noted above, it has long been part of U.S. "hedging" policy to keep a *larger number of nuclear weapons* in existence than we actually need at any given time, traditionally in the form of a sort of "strategic reserve" that is not operationally deployed but that *could be* put into service relatively easily in response to a sudden worsening of the threat environment. Conceivably, the Biden Administration could be intimating that it intends to dismantle this strategic reserve portion of the U.S. stockpile. For reasons that the reader should by now understand, that would be extraordinarily foolish - not least because it would preclude our most feasible and effective short-term answer to a Chinese sprint to numerical superiority: uploading reserve warheads onto existing U.S. systems that are capable of carrying more than the number with which they are currently deployed. This author, however, thinks such an interpretation unlikely. More probably, the Biden team is signaling that they actually fear there may be a *need* for such uploading in the future, and is thus unwilling, today, to seem to promise that we will always keep the U.S. "reserve" at its current size. (Uploading, after all, would necessarily draw down the size of that reserve until sufficient quantities new weapons were produced.)

nuclear forces.” [p.11] (*Without* such a wholesale revision of our strategic competitors’ approaches to nuclear weapons policy, the NPR makes clear, disarmament would create “unacceptable deterrence and assurance risks.” [p.11]) If there is to be a chance for resuming post-Cold War progress toward disarmament, in other words, *the burden now lies upon China and Russia to turn things around* by stopping their escalatory provocations. That is, alas, exactly correct, but it’s worth highlighting how far this is from the rhetoric even of 2009.

One way or the other – whether one feels regret at the demise of a noble dream or relief at an awakening from naïve delusion – it seems hard to contest the point that the disarmament agenda has clearly now run out of steam even for Obama Administration veterans. Joe Biden’s *Nuclear Posture Review*, one might say, is thus where the “Prague Speech” goes to die.

New Capabilities

Though the Biden Administration suggests at one point in the NPR that it does not want to increase the *size* of the U.S. nuclear stockpile [p.23], the Biden team actually does a pretty interesting job of making the case for new nuclear weapons capabilities. The NPR pledges that the United States will maintain nuclear forces that are “responsive to the threats we face” [p.1] even as that document spends a great deal of time – as described earlier – detailing how the nuclear threats we face are *growing*. In this worsening strategic environment, it would seem, we apparently need even *more* capabilities.

The Biden Administration commits to do more simply than continue the modernization and recapitalization of the legacy components of the U.S. nuclear “Triad” [p.11] – and to modernize and improve the U.S. Nuclear Command, Control, and Communications (NC3) system [p.22] –

pursuant to the agreement between President Obama and the U.S. Congress in connection with ratifying the New Strategic Arms Reduction Treaty (New START) in 2010.²⁶ The NDS also promises to “develop new capabilities, including in long-range strike, undersea, hypersonic[s] [sic], and autonomous systems,” and to “improve information sharing and the integration of non-kinetic tools.” [p.8] Noting that missile threats against the United States have also “rapidly expanded” [p.1], the MDR also pledges to “continue to stay ahead of North Korean missile threats to the homeland” through the use of what is described (albeit with notable unspecificity) as a “comprehensive missile defeat approach.” [p.1]

So far, those references to additional capabilities describe *non*-nuclear measures, but there are also some intriguing hints of more. For one thing, the NDS and NPR suggest a growing acceptance of the possibility of at least *some* kind of nuclear warfighting, and stress that it is a Biden Administration priority not to let limited nuclear weapons attacks impede American combat power. The NDS emphasizes “the ability to withstand, fight through, and recover quickly from disruption,” and to help our partners improve their ability to do so as well. [p.8] This disruption, of course, could take many forms – including non-nuclear ones – but the NPR is more specific: it commits to ensuring that the U.S. armed forces can operate despite “limited nuclear escalation,” and that they can maintain “military operations in a nuclear environment.” [p.10]

Despite promising to retire the B83-1 nuclear gravity bomb – a large, megaton-class weapon that has long remained in our arsenal because of its relative degree of utility against especially hard and deeply-buried targets

²⁶ See generally, e.g., “Treaty with Russia on Measures for Further Reduction and Limitation of Strategic Offensive Arms,” Treaty Document 111-5, 111th Congress, 2nd Session (May 13, 2020), available at <https://www.congress.gov/111/cdoc/tdoc5/CDOC-111tdoc5.pdf>.

(HDBTs), but that is now to be scrapped on account of what the NPR says are “increasing limitations on its capabilities and rising maintenance costs” [p.20] – the Biden Administration promises that it will work to develop something new to replace that big old bomb. What exactly that might be is not said, but the NPR is very clear that “leverage[ing] existing capabilities to hold at risk hard and deeply buried targets” is only a “near-term” solution. For the longer term, the NPR promises “to develop an enduring capability for improved defeat of such targets.” [p.20] (Note also the word “improved.” This eventual capability is supposed to be more effective than the B83 against HDBTs.)

To be sure, these comments do not expressly promise that the B83’s eventual hard-target-killing successor will actually be a nuclear weapon. Nevertheless, physics is physics, and high-end modern HDBTs are challenging targets to destroy. (This author’s best guess – assuming that the Biden team is actually serious about meeting the HDBT challenge, of course, which conceivably it is not – is that the only really feasible long-term alternative will indeed be a nuclear weapon: probably an earth-penetrating design with an extremely accurate terminal guidance system and the ability to maneuver so as to create more “angle of attack” options.) The Biden Administration is hardly wrong about the need for such capability, and I’ll be very happy to see it arrive if and when it does. But so much for the emphasis of the arms control community during the Obama-Biden era upon avoiding “the development of new nuclear warheads.”²⁷

And Yet Still Inadequate

But despite all this well-warranted repudiation of Vice President Biden’s own prior disarmament enthusiasms,

²⁷ 2010 NPR, *supra*, at vi, 7, & 46.

President Biden's strategic guidance still falls short. It is a fundamental tenet of the new NPR, for instance, that the United States will "maintain nuclear forces that are responsive to the threats we face" [p.1] and "maintain a nuclear posture that is responsive to the threats we face." [p.25] But these new guidance documents also make clear that we are presently in a strategic environment in which such threats are *increasing*. Russia, for instance, is "steadily expanding and diversifying nuclear systems that pose a direct threat to NATO and neighboring countries" [p.4], while China "has embarked on an ambitious expansion, modernization, and diversification of its nuclear forces." [p.4]

If anything, the Biden documents would seem to downplay these threats. The Biden NDS does observe that "[t]he range of nuclear options available to the PRC leadership will expand in the years ahead"[p.11], and that China has "plans for expanding fissile material production to support its growing arsenal." [p.17] In light of information released by the Department of Defense (DoD) just after the Biden NDS was published, however, things are even worse than the NDS describes.

According to DoD's 2022 Report to Congress on Chinese military power, China is

investing in and expanding the number of its land-, sea-, and air-based nuclear delivery platforms and constructing the infrastructure necessary to support this major expansion of its nuclear forces. The PRC is also supporting this expansion by increasing its capability to produce and separate plutonium by constructing fast breeder reactors and reprocessing facilities.²⁸

²⁸ U.S. Department of Defense, *Military and Security Developments Involving the People's Republic of China 2022* (Washington, D.C.: U.S. Department of Defense, 2021) [hereinafter "China Military Power

As noted earlier, the new NPR says China intends to have “at least 1,000 deliverable nuclear warheads” by the end of this decade. [p.4] That figure appears to come from a DoD report to Congress in 2021.²⁹ Anyone reading the NDS to get a useful picture of the Chinese nuclear threat would miss a great deal, however, for the *new* 2022 report by DoD says rather more. According to it, “[i]f China continues the pace of its nuclear expansion, it will likely field a stockpile of about 1500 warheads” by 2035.³⁰

This 1,500-warhead figure is a remarkable one, especially if one considers that the current legal limit on U.S. (and Russian) operationally deployed nuclear warheads under the New Strategic Arms Reduction Treaty (New START) is 1,550,³¹ and that as of September 2022, the U.S. is currently at only 1,420 such warheads under New START counting rules.³² This makes it sound as if China is sprinting at least for parity, and perhaps even for nuclear superiority.

And China’s nuclear build-up continues to accelerate. Even according to the DoD’s 2021 Report, the PRC’s nuclear expansion then “exceed[ed] the pace and size the DoD projected in 2020.”³³ According to the new 2022 Report,

2022”], at 94, available at https://insidedefense.com/sites/insidedefense.com/files/documents/2022/nov/11292022_china.pdf.

²⁹ Office of the Secretary of Defense, *Military and Security Developments Involving the People’s Republic of China 2021* (Washington, D.C.: U.S. Department of Defense, 2021) [hereinafter “China Military Power 2021”], at 90, available at <https://media.defense.gov/2021/Nov/03/2002885874/-1/-1/0/2021-CMPR-FINAL.PDF>.

³⁰ China Military Power 2022, *supra*, at 94.

³¹ U.S. Department of State, “New START Treaty” (November 17, 2022), available at <https://www.state.gov/new-start/>.

³² U.S. Department of State, “New START Treaty Aggregate Numbers of Strategic Offensive Arms,” fact sheet (September 1, 2022), available at <https://www.state.gov/new-start-treaty-aggregate-numbers-of-strategic-offensive-arms-3/>.

³³ China Military Power 2021, *supra*, at 90

Beijing “probably accelerated” this expansion *further* in 2021.³⁴ China’s pace of nuclear weapons expansion, it would seem, is discovered to be accelerating every year.

Back in 2021, the commander of the U.S. Strategic Command admitted that the size of the Chinese nuclear arsenal might even “triple or quadruple ... over the next decade,”³⁵ an estimate endorsed by the head of the U.S. Indo-Pacific Command.³⁶ In its 2021 Report, DoD gave no figure for the size of China’s then-current nuclear arsenal, saying only that “last year” – that is, in 2020 – “DoD estimated that the PRC had a nuclear warhead stockpile in the low-200s.”³⁷ Only a year later, however, the new 2022 Report now says “DoD estimates China’s operational nuclear warheads stockpile has surpassed 400.”³⁸ In just two years, therefore, the estimated size of China’s stockpile has approximately *doubled*.

The scope of the problem was already starting to become clear in 2021, when it was revealed that China was building at least 300 new intercontinental ballistic missile (ICBM) silos in its Western deserts.³⁹ Additionally, new technical estimates by independent scholars made clear that

³⁴ China Military Power 2022, *supra*, at 94.

³⁵ Admiral Charles A. Richard, “Forging 21st-Century Strategic Deterrence,” *Naval Institute Proceedings* (2021), available at <https://www.usni.org/magazines/proceedings/2021/february/forging-21st-century-strategic-deterrence>.

³⁶ Caitlin McFall, “US losing military edge in Asia as China looks like it is planning for war: US Indo-Pacific Command chief,” *Fox News* (March 10, 2021) (citing Admiral Philp Davidson), available at <https://www.foxnews.com/politics/us-losing-military-edge-in-asia-as-china-looks-like-planning-for-war-admiral.amp>.

³⁷ China Military Power 2021, *supra*, at 90.

³⁸ China Military Power 2022, *supra*, at 94.

³⁹ See, e.g., Kylie Atwood & Jennifer Hansler, “Satellite images appear to show China is making significant progress developing missile silos that could eventually launch nuclear weapons,” *CNN* (November 2, 2021), available at <https://www.cnn.com/2021/11/02/politics/china-suspected-silo-fields-report/index.html>.

Beijing already had, or was capable of easily producing, enough additional fissile material for its nuclear weapons program to create an arsenal of “most likely at least 1,270 nuclear warheads by 2030 – closing in on or exceeding the roughly 1,300 strategic warheads the United States currently has deployed on its intercontinental ballistic missiles.”⁴⁰

The 2022 DoD Report confirms these accounts, noting that “over 300” silos are now being built, and that they will be capable of launching either China’s DF-31 or DF-41 missile.⁴¹ Significantly, the DF-41 is reported to be capable of carrying as many as 10 warheads each.⁴² To be sure, the DoD’s 2022 Report says that the DF-41 is “likely intended” to be deployed with only three warheads each,⁴³ but even at that lower figure, that could – across more than 300 new silos – amount to more than 900 new strategic warheads, with a formidable *additional* upload capability should China decide to put more warheads on them in a quick sprint to superiority.

Nor is that even the *total* number of new silos China is building. According to the DoD’s 2022 Report, it is also constructing new silos for DF-5 strategic missiles.⁴⁴ Where does it end? As the new Report *also* notes, “Beijing has not

⁴⁰ “China’s Civil Nuclear Sector: Ploughshares to Swords?” Nonproliferation Policy Education Center *Occasional Paper*, no. 2102 (Henry J. Sokolski, ed.) (March 2021), at 7, available at https://npolicy.org/article_file/2102_Chinas_Civil_Nuclear_Sector.pdf.

⁴¹ China Military Power 2022, *supra*, at 94. As noted earlier, the 2022 report also confirms the earlier estimates that China would support its nuclear weapons expansion by increasing its capability to produce and separate plutonium by constructing fast breeder reactors and reprocessing facilities.

⁴² See, e.g., “DF-41 (Dong Feng-41 / CSS-X-20),” *CSIS Missile Defense Project* (July 31, 2020), available at <https://missilethreat.csis.org/missile/df-41/>.

⁴³ China Military Power 2022, *supra*, at 94.

⁴⁴ *Id.* at 100.

declared an end goal nor acknowledged the scale of its expansion.”⁴⁵

All this information is alarming indeed, and these figures do not even count China's new Air-Launched Ballistic Missile (ALBM) that the U.S. DoD says in its 2022 Report “may be nuclear capable.”⁴⁶ More significantly still, they don't count the new missile that is expected to be deployed on the PRC's new Type 096 ballistic missile submarines (SSBNs) that will “likely begin construction in the early 2020s.”⁴⁷ According to the DoD's 2021 Report, between existing Type 094 and next-generation Type 096 SSBNs, China “could have up to eight SSBNs [in service] by 2030.”⁴⁸ By other estimates, in fact, the figure could actually be 10 rather than eight.⁴⁹ In its 2022 Report, the Defense Department does not even offer a projection on numbers, noting merely that “the PRC will operate its JIN [Type 094] and Type 096 SSBN fleets concurrently.”⁵⁰

According the 2022 DoD Report, moreover, China is also apparently developing hypersonic missiles and a Fractional Orbit Bombardment System (FOBS) for nuclear weapons delivery, as well as a range of lower-yield nuclear weapons, and a strategic stealth bomber. It is moving its nuclear force toward a launch-on-warning (LOW) posture as well.⁵¹

⁴⁵ Id. at 97.

⁴⁶ Id. at 60.

⁴⁷ Id. at 96.

⁴⁸ China Military Power 2021, *supra*, at 49.

⁴⁹ See, e.g., John Grady, “China's Navy Could have 5 Aircraft Carriers, 10 Ballistic Missile Subs by 2030 Says CSBA Report,” *USNI News* (August 18, 2022), available at <https://news.usni.org/2022/08/18/chinas-navy-could-have-5-aircraft-carriers-10-ballistic-missile-subs-by-2030-says-csba-report>.

⁵⁰ China Military Power 2022, *supra*, at 96.

⁵¹ Id. at 60, 94, 98, & 100.

In light of all this, it is hard to escape the conclusion that the Biden NPR's description of the likely future size of China's "accelerating" nuclear weapons buildup downplays the problem. At the very least, its account of the challenge seems notably cautious even in light of information the Biden Administration *itself* published just a few weeks later in the form of DoD's 2022 China military report.

Perhaps one sees here the real basis for the Biden NPR's blandly anodyne phrasing about China being likely to produce "at least 1,000 deliverable nuclear warheads by the end of this decade." [p.4] "At least," indeed.

Such a grim trajectory would certainly explain the alarm expressed in November 2022 – shortly after the Biden Administration's NSS, NDS, NPR, and MDR were published – by the head of the U.S. Strategic Command, Admiral Charles Richard:

As I assess our level of deterrence against China, the ship is slowly sinking. ... It is sinking slowly, but it is sinking, as fundamentally they are putting capability in the field faster than we are. As those curves keep going, it isn't going to matter how good our [operating plan] is or how good our commanders are, or how good our forces are – we're not going to have enough of them. And that is a very near-term problem.⁵²

⁵² Quoted by C. Todd Lopez, "Stratcom Commander Says U.S. Should Look to 1950s to Regain Competitive Edge," DoD News (November 3, 2022), available at <https://www.defense.gov/News/News-Stories/Article/Article/3209416/stratcom-commander-says-us-should-look-to-1950s-to-regain-competitive-edge/>; see also Ellie Kaufman & Barbara Starr, "US military nuclear chief sounds the alarm about pace of China's nuclear weapons program," CCN (November 4, 2022), available at <https://www.cnn.com/2022/11/04/politics/us-china-nuclear-weapons-warning>.

Without some dramatic new countervailing U.S. effort, he warned, "China is simply going to outcompete us, and Russia isn't going anywhere anytime soon" either.⁵³

But having promised in the new NPR to "maintain nuclear forces that are responsive to the threats we face" [p.1], what does the Biden Administration do? When it comes to actual nuclear weapons systems, it either simply continues the status quo (*i.e.*, with "Triad" recapitalization) or actually *cuts* programs. To be fair, as noted earlier, the NPR does commit to developing "an enduring capability for improved defeat" of HDBTs. [p.20] It only makes this promise, however, in conjunction with retiring the B83-1 gravity bomb, thus removing a key element of how the U.S. arsenal is currently able to hold such targets at risk *years* in advance of the development of the vaguely-promised functional replacement.

As noted, the NPR also announces the cancellation of SLCM-N. [p.20] This will not only reduce our ability to generate nuclear forces in theater capable of providing a countervailing capability in the face of rapidly growing Chinese and Russian tactical nuclear deployments, but will also preclude reconstitution of a *type* of capability that key allies have long wished us to have in light of Russian and (especially) Chinese theater nuclear threats.⁵⁴ The move thus also undercuts the Biden NPR's claim to care about "strengthening regional nuclear deterrence" and the NDS' claim to "anchor" our military strategy in close

⁵³ Quoted by Lopez, *supra*.

⁵⁴ Assistant Secretary of State Christopher Ford, "Strengthening Deterrence and Reducing Nuclear Risks, Part II: The Sea-Launched Cruise Missile-Nuclear (SLCM-N)," U.S. Department of State, *Arms Control and International Security Papers*, vol. 1, no. 11 (July 23, 2020), available at <https://irp-cdn.multiscreensite.com/ce29b4c3/files/uploaded/ACIS%20Paper%2011%20-%20SLCM-N.pdf>.

collaboration with and support for U.S. allies and partners. [p.14]

Almost by its own admission, therefore, the Biden Administration's nuclear strategy falls short of its own promise in the NPR to "maintain a nuclear posture that is responsive to the threats we face." [p.25] Our country faces worsening nuclear threats, but the NPR forswears increasing the *size* of the U.S. nuclear stockpile [p.23] and it eliminates two nuclear weapons systems [pp.20] each of which provides a unique *type* of nuclear capability for which no replacement is as yet anywhere on the horizon. This will not be very reassuring to the allies and partners the Biden Administration claims to prize, and it certainly doesn't seem good for the overall efficacy of U.S. nuclear deterrence.

Areas for Bipartisan Cooperation

Nuclear Weapons Infrastructure

It is certainly good that U.S. officials continue to be committed to seeing through the modernization of the three legs of our nuclear "Triad," a huge effort to recapitalize multiple aged legacy systems that we rather foolishly allowed to be necessary at the same time. But it is also true that all the fancy delivery systems that fly, sail, or launch are worth nothing - in nuclear terms, anyway - without nuclear warheads to put on them. And it is lamentably *still* the case that we are far behind where we need to be in modernizing the nuclear weapons production infrastructure that makes nuclear deterrence possible.

The author has made this point repeatedly before, including in a paper with then-National Nuclear Security Administration (NNSA) Administrator Lisa Gordon-

Hagerty in 2020.⁵⁵ There clearly can be no nuclear deterrence *without* a nuclear infrastructure – since that is where nuclear weapons come from, and how they are maintained – and indeed maintaining a robust and healthy productive infrastructure *itself* helps deter an escalating nuclear arms race, by persuading strategic competitors that it would be unwise to get into such a race with us.⁵⁶

But the United States has allowed its infrastructure to slip into a woeful state of neglect. This has been, it is embarrassing to say, a bipartisan failure. For years – decades even – U.S. officials have neglected to provide it with the resources, manpower, political “top cover,” and strategic guidance it needs to perform this function as we so badly need it performed. The George W. Bush Administration spoke quite properly of the huge importance of having a “responsive”⁵⁷ nuclear infrastructure capable of responding to unexpected future threats by producing more weapons or new weapons if and when they are needed. The Obama Administration, in theory, also supported such an infrastructure – in part perhaps because being able to rely upon a truly responsive infrastructure against future threats seemed to make it possible to have an existing arsenal of “weapons in being”⁵⁸

⁵⁵ Assistant Secretary of State Christopher Ford, “Deterrence and the U.S. Nuclear Weapons Infrastructure,” U.S. Department of State, *Arms Control and International Security Papers*, vol. 1, no. 18 (September 9, 2020), available at <https://irp-cdn.multiscreensite.com/ce29b4c3/files/uploaded/ACIS%20Paper%2018%20--%20Nuclear%20Infrastructure.pdf>.

⁵⁶ *Id.* at 3.

⁵⁷ See, e.g., Robert S. Norris & Hans M. Kristensen, “What’s Behind the Nuclear Cuts?” *Arms Control Today* (October 2004), available at <https://www.armscontrol.org/act/2004-10/features/whats-behind-bushs-nuclear-cuts>.

⁵⁸ Cf. Christopher Ford, “Nuclear Deterrence with Unusable Weapons?” remarks at Hudson Institute (February 28, 2011) (using “weapons in

somewhat smaller than would otherwise need to be the case.⁵⁹ And the Trump Administration strongly supported recapitalizing that infrastructure in the ways it had long been clear was needed.⁶⁰

But nowhere near enough support has ever materialized. Perhaps it was because obscure and arcane details of productive infrastructure aren't as "sexy" as missiles and bombers, or as attention-getting if they don't work. (Decrepit bombers far older than their crews all but *advertise* strategic inattention, but who notices or gets agitated if some obscure building near Oak Ridge, Los Alamos, Livermore, Kansas City, Savannah River, or Amarillo is slowly disintegrating while its expert staff retire or decamp for the private sector?) Perhaps it was because building the *capacity* to make more warheads caused too much anxiety and cognitive dissonance in the minds of officials and politicians keen to signal virtuous fidelity to the disarmament dream.

Whatever the reasons, whenever administrations pushed for proper infrastructure recapitalization, Congress never followed through; and whenever Congress seemed willing to appropriate funds, administrations got skittish. (NNSA and the national laboratories that make up the nuclear complex also never seem to have been quite able to get out of their own organizational and bureaucratic way in becoming, together, the focused, agile, and responsive organism we need.) And so the United States remains, today, worryingly behind the ball.

being" term), available at <https://www.hudson.org/national-security-defense/nuclear-deterrence-with-unusable-weapons->

⁵⁹ See, e.g., Ford, "Deterrence and the U.S. Nuclear Weapons Infrastructure," *supra*, at 3.

⁶⁰ See, e.g., NNSA Administrator Lisa Gordon-Hagerty, testimony before the U.S. Senate Armed Services Committee (September 17, 2020), available at https://www.armed-services.senate.gov/imo/media/doc/Gordon-Hagerty_09-17-20.pdf.

Creditably, the Biden NPR says some pretty sound things about this. The NPR calls for accelerating relevant technology innovation to provide “enduring advantage in the nuclear enterprise” through new infrastructure capabilities “that can be leveraged as needed to ensure a safe, secure, and effective deterrent into the future.” [p.22] It pledges to build “a resilient and adaptive nuclear security enterprise.” [p.23]

Today, much of the stockpile [of U.S. nuclear weapons] has aged without comprehensive refurbishment. At a time of rising nuclear risks, a partial refurbishment strategy no longer serves our interests. A safe, secure, and effective deterrent requires modern weapons and a modern infrastructure, enabled by a world-class workforce equipped with modern tools. [p.23]

In light of the accelerating strategic threats the Biden security documents admit we face, the NPR commits the Biden Administration to building a “flexible stockpile capable of pacing threats, responding to uncertainty, and maintaining effectiveness.” [p.23] We must, it says, “re-establish, repair, and modernize our productive infrastructure” so that it can “respond in a timely way to threat developments and technology opportunities.” [p.23] To this end, the NPR promises a new “Production-based Resilience Program” that will enable the U.S. infrastructure to “produce weapons required in the near-term and beyond” and to “adapt to additional or new requirements” as needed. [p.23]

All this is well said, and one hopes it is sincerely meant, since finally achieving such a genuinely responsive infrastructure will take no small amount of money, time, and effort. Yet it is indeed critical to meet this challenge. Such an infrastructure modernization agenda can be – and *must* be – a key focus of bipartisan attention.

“Integrated Deterrence”

One of the key organizing concepts of the Biden Administration’s NDS is the idea of “integrated deterrence.” According to that document, “[o]ur competitors, particularly the PRC, are pursuing holistic strategies that employ varied forms of coercion, malign behavior, and aggression to achieve their objectives and weaken the foundations of a stable and open international system.” [p.8] To meet this challenge, the NDS declares, we need a “holistic response” that aligns a maximally broad range of U.S. policies, investments, and activities to sustain and strengthen deterrence. This approach, it says, needs to be “tailored” to the competitors and objectives in question and coordinated both inside and outside the Department. [p.8]

(As to *what* is to be deterred, the NDS suggests that the focus is upon armed attack, of essentially any sort. Integrated deterrence seeks to influence an adversary’s decision making about whether to “use force” by shaping its perceptions of the costs and benefits of such force. [p.8] The NDS seems to further emphasize this focus upon deterring the use of armed force, discussing the need to deter “PRC attacks,” “Russian attacks,” “North Korean attacks,” and “Iranian attacks.” [p.10])

In any event, the NDS says that “integrated deterrence” involves “working seamlessly across warfighting domains, theaters, the spectrum of conflict, all instruments of national power, and our network of Alliances and partnerships.” It is “[t]ailored to specific circumstances,” “coordinated,” “multifaceted” [p.1], and – in yet another quiet rebuke to “sole purpose” theory, given that the NDS is discussing deterrence of the full range of potential armed attacks – “backstopped” by U.S. nuclear weapons. [p.1] (According to the NPR, moreover, this nuclear backstopping of *all* deterrence is apparently to be achieved in part through

better synchronizing nuclear and non-nuclear planning, exercises, and operations." [pp.3, 6, & 10])

Integrated deterrence is also referenced in the Biden MDR, which describes it as "a framework for weaving together all instruments of national power." [p.5] It is also emphasized in the NSS, which defines it as the means by which "we will combine our strengths to achieve maximum effect in deterring acts of aggression." [p.20] Indeed, integrated deterrence is given a full page of explication in the NSS, which notes the importance of such "integration" across domains, across regions, across the spectrum of conflict, "across the U.S. Government," and "with allies and partners." [p.22]

All of this seems quite a sensible aspiration, as long as comments such as the MDR's reference to the need to put "diplomacy at the forefront" of integrated deterrence [p.5] are not used to make excuses for skimping on the various elements of "hard power" that provide so much of deterrence's underlying foundation. ("Don't worry about that canceled missile program. We'll make up for it with 'integrated deterrence'!") On its face, at least, integrated deterrence is hard to argue with.

Of course, it is hardly a novel idea to argue that we should effectively and dynamically weave together all elements of national power in order to be better at influencing adversary perceptions so as to deter aggression: it goes back as far as the 2001 NPR. But it is a good idea nonetheless, and the NDS is certainly right that the kind of smooth, effective, and truly "holistic" deterrence-focused policymaking that we need to meet our contemporary "China challenge" has never been a particularly strong suit for the still rather fractured and poorly coordinated U.S. national security bureaucracy.⁶¹ If the Biden

⁶¹ See, e.g., Christopher Ford, "Systems and Strategy: Causal Maps, Complexity, and Strategic Competition," MITRE Center for Strategic Competition, *Occasional Papers*, vol. 1, no. 7 (November 14, 2022), at 4,

Administration pursues this as seriously as it should, therefore – and if ways can be found to flesh out detailed meanings for the term and understandings of the organizational and leadership “best practices” needed to give it operational life – the development and implementation of sophisticated ways to “integrate” policymaking in support of deterrence can be another high bipartisan priority that Republicans, too, should support.

“Campaigning”

A similar point can be made about the idea of “campaigning,” which is another key organizing concept for the NDS. According to Secretary of Defense Lloyd Austin’s introductory letter to the NDS, campaigning means “the deliberate effort to synchronize the Department’s activities and investments to aggregate forces and resources to shift conditions in our favor” in the operational environment. It aims to “focus on the most consequential competitor activities that, if left unaddressed, would endanger our military advantages now and in the future.”

In effect, therefore, “campaigning” is no less *integrated* than “integrated deterrence,” but it is a more general application of the basic idea of holistically employing all relevant available levers of national power and influence for calculated effect. Where integrated deterrence does this specifically in order to influence adversary perceptions so as to deter armed attack, campaigning applies similar degrees of coordination to achieving other sorts of identified task (*e.g.*, meeting a defined objective, creating a set of conditions in the operating environment, mitigating or eliminating identified risks, or implementing a particular

plan). Campaigning, therefore, applies itself much more broadly and flexibly to a wider range of problems. According to the Biden NSS, campaigning is about “sequencing logically linked military activities to advance strategy-aligned priorities” [p.20], and the NDS describes it as nothing less than “the conduct and sequencing of logically-linked military activities to achieve strategy-aligned objectives over time.” [p.12]

The NDS warns that effective campaigning will require “discipline” as the Department of Defense improves its understanding of the operational environment, defines and prioritizes objectives, and connects possible approaches to available “ways and means.” (The NDS also notes that campaigning must take proper account of “feedback loops” [p.12], which presumably refers to positive [accelerating] or negative [dampening] relationships between different elements of power and influence or between actions or activities available to relevant stakeholders.) Discipline will also be needed because “[i]n service of strategic prioritization, we will focus day-to-day force employment on a more narrow set of tasks than we do currently” [p.12] – with the implication that leaders will have to be willing to handle the bureaucratic and political pain and pushback that results from deliberately *not* pursuing some worthy objectives because a decision has been made to focus attention upon *more* worthy ones. Strategic prioritization and consistent focus are essential, in other words, but are likely to be uncomfortable.

Once again, this is both very commonsensical and likely to be very challenging in bureaucratic, organizational, data-analytical, leadership, and decision-process terms. As with deterrence, however, doing campaigning in the right sort of genuinely integrated and holistic way would surely make U.S. security policymaking and Defense Department operations significantly more effective than we are capable

of achieving today using traditional, “business as usual” procedures.

As with integrated deterrence, it is in no way a novel idea that one should coordinate one’s activity better, but – just as an individual person might find a financial advisor’s recommendation to earn more and spend less, or a doctor’s advice to eat better and be more active, to be unquestionable in theory but challenging to implement in practice – it will be very difficult to do these things in a large bureaucracy operating in an extraordinarily complex and dynamic environment, and to *keep* doing them over time. If the Biden Administration’s explicit focus upon campaigning signals its intent to go after this objective with the energy and resolution it will require, therefore, this too should be a bipartisan priority.

Conclusion

There is thus much in these “Big Four” documents to criticize, and yet also much to praise. As described, moreover, there are some areas of considerable importance on which the entire U.S. policy community – even in this age of polarization – can hopefully come together to drive much-needed change.

This paper has only touched the surface of the issues raised in and by the Biden Administration’s new security guidance documents. And a number of additional important topics deserve attention not given them here. These include the “adjustment” represented by the NSS’ explicit (if only partial) retreat from economic globalization in the name of “cop[ing] with dramatic global changes such as widening inequality within and among countries.” [p.12] Also deserving more attention is the Biden Administration’s self-proclaimed pursuit of “a modern industrial and innovation strategy” [p.14], which it says is a “modern industrial strategy” [p.33] designed to jump-start

a U.S. innovation economy challenged by Chinese competition.

Much important work also remains to be done as the Biden Administration seeks to build what the NSS describes as “the strongest and broadest possible coalition of nations” to succeed in strategic competition [p.7] by means of “[i]ntegration with allies and partners through investments in interoperability and joint capability development, cooperative posture planning, and coordinated diplomatic and economic approaches.” [p.22] The NSS expects that the United States will be able “to anchor an allied techno-industrial base that will safeguard our shared security, prosperity and values” through “working with allies and partners to harness and scale new technologies, and promote the foundational technologies of the 21st century.” [p.33]

It is surely correct that “[i]ncorporating allies and partners at every stage of defense planning is crucial to meaningful collaboration.” [p.21] And it is to the Biden Administration’s strategic-competitive credit that it seeks to “remove barriers to deeper collaboration with allies and partners, to include issues related to joint capability development and production to safeguard our shared military-technological edge.” [p.21] To achieve these lofty objectives, however, will require a great deal of time and effort by way of sophisticated trans-national systems engineering and systems integration, conceived both in the technical and in the organizational senses.

The NSS’ aspiration to bring about improved “[i]ntegration across the U.S. Government to leverage the full array of American advantages, from diplomacy, intelligence, and economic tools to security assistance and force posture decisions” [p.22] is also a worthy goal. It is also yet another major challenge that will ask much of us in terms of developing and implementing effective “best

practices” for the “whole of nation” responses needed to contemporary strategic competition challenges.

The Biden “Big Four” documents *do* fall short in some key regards. As described above, for instance, the NSS provides guidance too unfocused for optimal national security prioritization, and engages in an awkward and problematic effort to shoehorn a sprawling dog’s breakfast of progressive domestic policy priorities into “national security” discourse. Meanwhile, although it puts commendable distance between itself and the strategic naivete of Obama Administration disarmament rhetoric, the Biden NPR seems to respond only half-heartedly to the worsening nuclear nuclear threats it admits that we face.

Nevertheless, there is yet much in these documents that can provide at least a starting point for shared endeavor to improve deterrence and make our security bureaucracy better able to meet the challenges ahead. With luck, the U.S. policy community can build upon what is sound and prudent in these documents. We all have much work to do together.

About the Author

The Hon. Christopher Ford is a MITRE Fellow and founding Director of the MITRE Corporation's Center for Strategic Competition, as well as a Visiting Fellow at Stanford University's Hoover Institution. Dr. Ford formerly served as U.S. Assistant Secretary of State for International Security and Nonproliferation, also performing the duties of the Under Secretary for Arms Control and International Security, and before that as Special Assistant to the President and NSC Senior Director for WMD and Counterproliferation. The views he expresses here are entirely his own, and do not necessarily represent those of anyone else.

Previous National Institute Press *Occasional Papers*

Volume 2 (2022)

David J. Trachtenberg, *Deterring China in the Taiwan Strait: Potential Economic Tools for a Victory Denial Strategy*, December 2022

Kathleen C. Bailey, *China's Quest for a New International Order and Its Use of Public Diplomacy as a Means*, November 2022

Michaela Dodge, *Alliance Politics in a Multipolar World*, October 2022

Matthew R. Costlow, *Vulnerability is No Virtue and Defense is No Vice: The Strategic Benefits of Expanded U.S. Homeland Missile Defense*, September 2022

Keith B. Payne and David J. Trachtenberg, *Deterrence in the Emerging Threat Environment: What is Different and Why it Matters*, August 2022

Jennifer Bradley, *China's Nuclear Modernization and Expansion: Ways Beijing Could Adapt its Nuclear Policy*, July 2022

Christopher A. Ford, *Building Partnerships Against Chinese Revisionism: A "Latticework Strategy" for the Indo-Pacific*, June 2022

Ilan Berman, *Crisis and Opportunity in U.S. Mideast Policy*, May 2022

Michaela Dodge, *Russia's Influence Operations in the Czech Republic, Poland, and Romania*, April 2022

Keith B. Payne and Matthew R. Costlow, *Victory Denial: Deterrence in Support of Taiwan*, March 2022

Christopher A. Ford, *Defending Taiwan: Defense and Deterrence*, February 2022

Keith B. Payne, *Tailored Deterrence: China and the Taiwan Question*, January 2022

Volume 1 (2021)

Gary L. Geipel, *Post-Truth and National Security: Context, Challenges, and Responses*, December 2021

Thomas D. Grant, *China's Nuclear Build-Up and Article VI NPT: Legal Text and Strategic Challenge*, November 2021

Susan Koch, *Securing Compliance with Arms Control Agreements*, October 2021

Keith B. Payne and Michaela Dodge, *Stable Deterrence and Arms Control in a New Era*, September 2021

Steve Lambakis, *Space as a Warfighting Domain: Reshaping Policy to Execute 21st Century Spacepower*, August 2021

Matthew R. Costlow, *A Net Assessment of "No First Use" and "Sole Purpose" Nuclear Policies*, July 2021

David J. Trachtenberg, Michaela Dodge and Keith B. Payne, *The "Action-Reaction" Arms Race Narrative vs. Historical Realities*, June 2021

Matthew R. Costlow, *Safety in Diversity: The Strategic Value of ICBMs and the GBSD in the Nuclear Triad*, May 2021

David J. Trachtenberg, *Congress' Role in National Security Decision Making and the Executive-Legislative Dynamic*, April 2021

Bradley A. Thayer, *The PRC's New Strategic Narrative as Political Warfare: Causes and Implications for the United States*, March 2021

Michaela Dodge, *Russia's Influence Operations in the Czech Republic During the Radar Debate and Beyond*, February 2021

Keith B. Payne, *Redefining Stability for the New Post-Cold War Era*, January 2021