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U.S. Nuclear Policies for a Safer World

SUMMARY

NTI Co-Chairs Ernest J. Moniz and Sam Nunn call on the United States to resume a position of global leadership to reduce the risks posed by nuclear weapons. Their recommendations—which are further elaborated and reinforced in seven related policy papers by NTI experts and former officials—include proposals for changes to U.S. nuclear policy and posture, reengagement with Russia on a range of strategic stability and arms control issues, sustained dialogue and nuclear risk reduction measures with China, and recommitment to multilateral efforts to strengthen the global nonproliferation regime.

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Strengthening the Foundation for Nuclear Stability

Ernest J. Moniz and Sam Nunn

Fortunately, most Americans do not lie awake at night in fear of nuclear war; yet, the unsettling reality is that nuclear risks have been on the rise for years, and the risk of use of a nuclear weapon is higher today than at any time since the Cuban Missile Crisis. Reducing these risks will require U.S. leadership and renewed commitment to diplomacy and engagement, bold and creative policy choices, and unwavering focus.

The Biden administration took office in January 2021 faced with daunting challenges, domestic and foreign. Although the agenda is crowded, avoiding the cataclysmic risk of nuclear weapons use must be a top priority. The administration's review of U.S. nuclear policies and posture is taking place against the backdrop of increasing tensions among nuclear-armed states. In addition, the arms control framework that has been integral to managing nuclear competition for decades has eroded, and new technologies and evolving threats add complexity to the challenge of rebuilding it.

The essays in this report reflect the need for a multifaceted response, including (a) changes to U.S. nuclear policies and posture to reduce the role of nuclear weapons in U.S. security policy; (b) renewed engagement with Russia on strategic issues; (c) a deeper foundation of dialogue on nuclear issues with China; and (d) a recommitment to seeking multilateral solutions to strengthen the global non-proliferation regime and reduce nuclear risks. Also necessary is a renewed foundation of trust and cooperation with the invaluable network of U.S. allies and partners in Europe and the Asia-Pacific region, which is fundamental to U.S. national security and serves as a force multiplier for U.S. leadership and interests around the world.

It is crucial to build and sustain domestic support for nuclear security policies that will keep Americans safe. The administration and Congress should establish a new bipartisan liaison group—comprising House and Senate leaders and committee chairs working with senior administration officials—focused on Russia policy, nuclear risks, and NATO. Such a group would facilitate regular communication and greater coherence between the executive and legislative branches and help rebuild consensus in support of engagement and arms control as essential tools in advancing U.S. national security.

The Biden administration should also work to establish policies and processes to put guardrails around the president's "sole authority" to order the use of nuclear weapons to ensure that any such decision would be deliberative and based on appropriate planning and consultation, including with leaders in Congress. Implementation would be dependent on the particular circumstances that are causing consideration of nuclear use. These policies would improve confidence in how the U.S. government makes critically important decisions and policies related to nuclear use.

The essays in this report recommend additional steps President Biden and his team could take to adapt U.S. nuclear policy and posture to reduce the risk of use of nuclear weapons.

These steps include:

- Undertaking an internal “failsafe review” to ensure that U.S. nuclear weapons and command-and-control and warning systems are hardened against cyberattacks and to identify other steps that could increase decision time for leaders in a crisis and reduce the risk that a terrible miscalculation could lead to inadvertent nuclear conflict. This review should reexamine post-launch destruct devices on U.S. nuclear weapons and other measures to reduce the risk of nuclear war. Other states with nuclear weapons should be encouraged to conduct their own “failsafe reviews” to reduce the chances of a mistake, an accident, or a blunder leading to nuclear use.
- As part of a new nuclear posture review, adopting a new declaratory policy that narrows the range of scenarios in which the United States would consider the use of nuclear weapons, including by declaring that deterring a nuclear attack against the United States and its allies and partners is the “sole purpose” of U.S. nuclear weapons. This will require careful consultations with U.S. allies in Europe and the Asia-Pacific and reassurances of the U.S. commitment to—and capabilities for—their defense.

It also is imperative that the United States and Russia reengage to strengthen strategic stability and further reduce both countries’ nuclear arsenals, while continuing to hold Moscow accountable for its violations of international law. As the two countries with the largest nuclear arsenals in the world, both have an obligation—despite their differences—to work to reduce the numbers of these weapons and the risks that they will ever be used. The extension of the New Strategic Arms Reduction Treaty (New START) was an essential first step, and Washington and Moscow must build on that agreement to make further reductions and to address growing challenges to strategic stability.

Recommendations include the following:

- In the near term, the United States and Russia should signal a new direction through unilateral, reciprocal commitments to modest nuclear warhead reductions below the level required by New START, underpinned by the treaty’s binding limits and verification provisions.
- The two sides should immediately begin a strategic stability dialogue and initiate negotiations on a more ambitious follow-on set of agreements to
 - Limit all strategic-range delivery systems, including those not covered by New START.
 - Provide transparency and limits on the total nuclear warhead stockpile on each side.
 - Restore a verifiable ban on ground-based intermediate-range missiles west of the Urals, and when possible more broadly.
 - Encourage more stabilizing nuclear force postures with respect to both strategic forces and non-strategic forces in and near Europe.
- Negotiations should take place in the context of a broader dialogue covering the wide range of factors that affect strategic stability, including the long-standing issue of missile defense and new concerns like cyber. New ideas and flexible forms of agreement are needed to address such issues productively.

While the next round of arms reductions should remain a bilateral U.S.-Russia process, the Biden administration must simultaneously engage China on strategic issues, taking into account the broader regional context. Growing tensions in the U.S.-China relationship, particularly against a backdrop of China's continued expansion and modernization of its nuclear capabilities, are increasing the risk of conflict and possible escalation to the use of nuclear weapons in the Asia-Pacific.

Formal arms control agreements between the United States and China (or trilateral agreements among the United States, China, and Russia) are unlikely in the near term. Nonetheless, the United States and China should work to develop and sustain a regular dialogue on strategic issues, with a focus on (a) reducing the risk of use of nuclear weapons; (b) constraining the potential for an arms race; and (c) establishing a foundation of engagement that could lead to transparency and confidence-building measures and, over the longer term, potential arms control agreements. These issues cannot be isolated from the broader regional context of the threat posed by North Korea's nuclear and missile programs and U.S. security commitments to its allies in Asia.

Steps explored in this report include:

- Establishing regular, bilateral U.S.-China dialogues on key issues, including nuclear doctrine and policy, emerging technologies that could have a strategic impact, and the North Korean nuclear and missile threats and their implications for U.S. missile defense development. In the context of these dialogues, the two sides could pursue steps to increase predictability, such as exchanging information on each country's plans for nuclear modernization, as well as current and planned development and deployment of hypersonic systems and missile defense capabilities.
- Developing and strengthening bilateral crisis avoidance and management measures, including an agreement on advance notification of ballistic missile launches and the establishment of bilateral Nuclear Risk Reduction centers.

Lastly, the Biden administration should restore U.S. leadership of multilateral efforts to reduce nuclear risks. The Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty (NPT) remains the cornerstone of the global non-proliferation regime, and the United States should work with all parties—and in particular through the P5 process—to strengthen the treaty and advance multilateral non-proliferation and disarmament efforts. The United States should work with the rest of the P5 to affirm their commitment to preventing the use of nuclear weapons; expand and deepen dialogue on nuclear issues, including doctrine, risk reduction, and strategic stability; increase transparency on total warheads stockpiles; reaffirm and uphold moratoria on nuclear testing; and declare a moratorium on the production of fissile material for use in nuclear weapons or other nuclear explosive devices.

In today's world, it is understood that the United States will continue to possess and deploy nuclear weapons for its security and that of allies and partners for as long as is necessary. At the same time, for decades—dating back to the darkest days of the Cold War—the United States has worked to steadily reduce the role and number of these weapons in its security policy. The Biden administration has an opportunity and a responsibility to build on that important legacy, recommitting to the ultimate goal of a world without nuclear weapons and working to make that goal a reality.