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Biden Administration's Nuclear Posture Review and American Nuclear Policy: A Critical Overview

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BIDEN ADMINISTRATION'S NUCLEAR POSTURE REVIEW AND AMERICAN NUCLEAR POLICY: A CRITICAL OVERVIEW

Rizwan Zeb[*]

Abstract

The US Nuclear Posture Review (NPR) has been an important document detailing the US administration's policy preferences since its first issuance in 1994. Biden administration released its NPR in October 2022, which identifies nuclear rivals and focus areas examining the role of nuclear weapons in overall US strategy. Using the historical research method and open-source information, the paper provides an overview of the US strategic calculus on nuclear weapons since 1945, focusing on post-Cold War developments and how its nuclear policy and strategy evolved. The paper argues that despite advocating for nuclear disarmament, US presidents stayed within lip service and kept enhancing the US nuclear stockpile. It also highlights that President Trump's decisions adversely affected US nuclear weapons policy and global security and that President Biden's NPR would follow the route rather than fulfil his campaign promises. The paper has three parts: the first deals with US nuclear policy during the Cold War; the second looks at the policy during the post-Cold War era from President Bush Senior to President Biden. The third and final part critically analyses the overall nuclear policy challenges faced by the Biden Administration and how it might address them.

Keywords: Nuclear Posture Review, Nuclear Weapons, Nuclear Proliferation, Non-proliferation, US Nuclear Policy.

Introduction

Since the disintegration of the USSR and the end of the Cold War, every US president has released a Nuclear Posture Review (NPR) outlining their administration's perspective on nuclear weapons' role and primary features of nuclear strategy. President Joe Biden[1] has also initiated an assessment of the US nuclear strategy with the main objective of reducing reliance on nuclear weapons in the national security policy.[2] However, the Biden administration's nuclear intentions remain unclear, as they have yet to address concerns about the first-use policy and the Iran deal that was Biden's campaign promise. The Biden administration has continued President Trump's nuclear weapons modernisation plan while making the latest US nuclear weapons stockpile figure public and inching towards extending START. The NPR released by the Biden administration in October 2022 offers nothing new and is

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more or less old wine in a new bottle. This paper, therefore, situates nuclear weapons within Washington's strategic calculus since 1945, when the US used atomic bombs against Japan, becoming the only country to have targeted an adversary with an atomic bomb.

Soon after World War II, the world witnessed a rivalry between the US and USSR that lasted for almost half a century and polarised the world into two rival blocks. Although no direct war was fought between the two superpowers, both kept developing their nuclear arsenals, war gaming and strategies for how they would fight each other in case a war broke out. Of late, taking advantage of hindsight, a group of scholars, mainly from the West, has taken the position that the prime reason for not using nuclear weapons ever since its first and only use back in 1945 was primarily because of a realisation that the US policymakers considered it immoral. It gave birth to the idea of nuclear taboo. This view fails to recognise that throughout this period, both countries kept on planning and strategising how to fight each other, how to use nuclear weapons and against what targets in case a war breaks out. There were many misses; the Cuban missile crisis is prime amongst such instances in which the two remained eyeball to eyeball for almost two weeks, and a war resulting in a nuclear exchange appeared imminent.

After the USSR's disintegration and the resultant culmination of the Cold War, the Soviet threat to US national security disappeared. Nevertheless, the US kept its nuclear arsenals intact, advancing and incorporating them into its national security discourse in the changing geopolitical and geostrategic environment. Since 9/11, a new dimension was added to US nuclear discourse, and nuclear terrorism became part of its threat perception with a proposition that a nuclear state might fail and its global interests would be under threat, thus becoming a major concern. President Clinton and President Obama did not move beyond lip service on the issue of global nuclear disarmament. They not only kept US nuclear stockpile intact but, in a few instances, further enhanced it. President Bush's infamous speech in which he pointed to the presence of an axis of evil expanded US threat perception, particularly in the nuclear domain. It was argued that rogue states like North Korea and Iran and violent non-state actors like al-Qaida pose a serious threat to the US, and due to this, the US must retain the nuclear option. President Trump took several decisions that could adversely affect US nuclear weapons policy and global peace and security.

This paper aims to provide an overview of the US nuclear weapons policy since 1945 and analyse the challenges the current Biden administration faces in formulating and conducting its nuclear policy. For this, a historical research method has been adopted in which published and open-source information in books, reports, research papers, and articles have been consulted. As the paper provides a holistic overview of the evolution of US nuclear strategy and policy with a particular focus on its nuclear declaratory policy, it is divided into three sections to bring out the salient features of this evolution and how further developments contributed to it.

The first part of the paper deals with the advent of nuclear weapons and how American nuclear thinking evolved during the Cold War. The second part then takes the discussion further with a particular focus on changes that occurred during the post-Cold War and the war against terrorism and how Washington responded to the challenges that emerged during this period, and how nuclear weapons figured in the overall US security calculus. This section also highlights the significance of the nuclear posture review and details the key points of different NPRs released by the Bush senior administration until President Trump's administration. This broad overview then sets the stage for the final and core part, the Biden administration's NPR. It begins with the statements and promises made during his election campaign about changes he would like to bring to US nuclear policy. It highlights his administration's challenges and how this is reflected in NPR. The section also addresses the factors that pushed President Biden to ignore most of his campaign promises and analyses the overall nuclear policy challenges faced by the US and the options he might use to address these by looking at the salient features of NPR.

Advent of the Nuclear Bomb

Churchill reacting to the successful test of the nuclear bomb, declared it the greatest of inventions. For him, gunpowder and electricity were trivial and meaningless compared to an atomic bomb. He stated it was the second coming of wrath.[3] In the beginning, the role assigned to the nuclear bomb was assurance against the alleged German plan to build a bomb;[4] however, once the German threat was eliminated, its utility did not diminish, and it was to be used against US enemies. According to Henry Stimson, building an atomic bomb was:

> *Common objective throughout the war was to be the first to produce an atomic weapon and use it. The possible atomic weapon was considered to be a new and tremendously powerful explosive, as legitimate as any other of the deadly explosive weapons of modern war. The entire purpose was the production of a military weapon; on no other ground could the wartime expenditure of so much time and money have been justified. The exact circumstances in which that weapon might be used were unknown to us until the middle of 1945.*[5]

The US nuclear attack on Hiroshima on August 6, 1945, resulted in approximately 80,000 deaths and around 40,000 people got injured. On August 9, Nagasaki was targeted with another atomic bomb, resulting in at least 40,000 deaths.[6]

Nuclear weapons were vital in initiating almost half a century-long Cold War between the USSR and the US. As the relationship between the two started to sour post-Berlin fall and USSR held a significant part of Berlin, the perception of the USSR as a potential aggressor was strengthening.[7] Americans believed that with a monopoly on a destructive weapon such as the nuclear bomb, they would have an edge. Churchill, commenting on the role of atomic weapons in blocking Soviet ingress in Europe, claimed that had the US not had a nuclear bomb, Europe would have been

taken over by the Communists easily.[8] However, the US nuclear monopoly was short-lived; in 1949, the USSR tested a nuclear weapon.

President Truman addressing his advisors in 1946, highlighted the difference between nuclear and traditional weapons. He stated that unlike conventional weapons such as rifles and cannons, a nuclear weapon is not just for targeting military targets; it can eliminate unarmed people, including women and children; hence an atomic bomb should be treated differently. He further argued that it is more than just a military weapon.[9] It indicated the initial American perception of the atomic bomb and how they viewed it. According to NSC-68, nuclear weapons were not a tool to prevent war, and it viewed and projected the need to adopt a policy of calculated and gradual coercion. At the time, this view was held dominantly in Washington; USSR had a limited arsenal, if at all.

Massive Retaliation Doctrine

The first significant development was the introduction of the so-called Massive Retaliation doctrine.[10] It was proposed in National Security Council document 162/2 titled "Basic National Security Policy."[11] The document highlighted the need to achieve nuclear superiority to counter the USSR, which would require many nuclear bombs.[12] It resulted in a massive buildup of US nuclear arsenals. According to the data, up till 1953, the US had more than a thousand nuclear bombs, but this number rose to 18000 when Eisenhower's presidency ended.[13] The US had clearly drawn plans to employ these weapons in case of a war against the USSR and, in the initial years, China as well. Single Integrated Operational Plan (SIOP) is an essential reference document.[14] SIOP-62 identified more than a thousand targets (ground zeros) in China, USSR and their satellite states and how to employ more than 35000 nuclear bombs and a robust strategic force against them.[15] A scrutiny of this plan indicates that this plan made no distinction between counterforce and counter-value targets. It was in line with the rationale of massive retaliation, which would be massive, brutal and indiscriminate. According to an official report:

> *The time is approaching when both the United States and the Soviets will possess capabilities for inflicting devastating atomic attacks on each other. Were war to break out when this period is reached, a tremendous military advantage would be gained by the power that struck first and succeeded in carrying through an effective first strike.*[16]

Flexible Response

The Soviet conventional superiority in Europe (NATO states) and continuous development of its nuclear weapons resulted in a rethink in Washington about the doctrine of massive response. First, the destruction that the US might face in nuclear war and second, under what circumstances and how soon in a conflict between the USSR and European NATO members, the US extend its nuclear umbrella and uses nuclear weapons. It was an important question as the USSR enjoyed conventional

superiority against NATO states in the European theatre. This rethink resulted in the adoption of a flexible response. It called for a decreased reliance on US nuclear weapons to counter or deter Soviet-limited or localised aggression. It argued that to counter such aggression, the US should reduce its reliance on nuclear weapons and boost and enhance its conventional capabilities.[17] The Flexible Response policy was propagated using a combined conventional-nuclear capacity in response to a Soviet ingress. Another vital element of flexible response was a marked distinction between counterforce and counter-value targeting, unlike the massive response that advocated massive attack. It was stated that during a war (conventional or nuclear), the primary objective and target should be its military capabilities and supporting elements avoiding targeting civilian centres and areas.[18]

Mutually Assured Destruction (MAD)

Enthoven and Smith defined MAD as "Deter a deliberate nuclear attack upon the United States or its allies by maintaining at all times a clear and unmistakable ability to inflict an unacceptable degree of damage upon any aggressor, or combination of aggressors- even after absorbing a surprise first strike."[19] The Cuban missile crisis brought yet another change in American thinking and nuclear-targeting philosophy. US Secretary of Defence Robert McNamara, who earlier advocated the adoption of counterforce against the USSR, later actively propagated the adoption of counter-value targeting. While supporting the counterforce option, the rationale was that limiting attacks to specific military locations and installations would not let the conflict escalate beyond a limited military level or to a full-fledged nuclear exchange.

However, McNamara argued about adopting counter-value targeting three years after the Cuban missile crisis. He argued that the enemy's assured destruction could be achieved by using 400 nuclear weapons as these would be enough to considerably destroy the enemy on both military and non-military sides as in a conflict involving nuclear weapons, these would destroy almost half of USSR's industry and kill one-third of its population.[20] McNamara argued that countering or responding to an attack by the USSR through adaptation of this doctrine which ensures mutual annihilation, would be an effective deterrence. It was later known as Mutually Assured Destruction or MAD in the literature. Interestingly it was not McNamara who called it MAD, but one of its vocal critics Donald Brennan, a noted American military analyst, made it famous using its acronym MAD to describe its flaws.

The main idea behind this was the idea of sufficiency. By sufficiency, it was meant that the US should possess enough forces to cause sufficient pain and damage to the enemy to deter its aggression. In 1974, James Schlesinger, then US Secretary of Defence, declared that the US would no longer follow MAD and would opt for selective strikes. At the same time, he and the like-minded group argued that the USSR should be convinced it could not get the upper hand in a war with the US. It continued under the Carter administration. For Carter, such countervailing strategy should focus on denning the Soviets a range of limited options instead of creating such

opportunities for the US. However, MAD's echo remained during the 1970s. Ronald Reagan replaced Carter as US President. He believed the US should find ways and means to ensure victory in a war with the USSR instead of just countervailing it. In 1983, he initiated a program to intercept incoming Soviet intercontinental ballistic missiles.[21] It was dubbed as the Strategic Defence Initiative (SDI).[22]

More so, it was President Reagan who stalled arms limitations and arms control negotiations going on between the US and the USSR since the period of détente. Although détente was short-lived, the arms control talks continued, and several agreements were signed with positive on-ground progress. President Reagan initiated Strategic Arms Reduction Talks, commonly known as START.[23] Initially, the Soviets resisted participating in it, arguing that no meaningful progress could be made in strategic arms reduction when the US was actively pursuing SDI. It changed when Mikhail Gorbachev took the helm of affairs in Moscow. He presented his vision of how both the US and USSR could escape a nuclear holocaust and eventually reach the goal of universal nuclear disarmament. President Reagan agreed to this in principle, as it became evident in a summit in Reykjavik, Iceland, in October 1986; however, he refused to abandon SDI. Despite this, both countries were able to move on, cutting down their nuclear arsenals. However, rapid changes in Europe by the end of 1989, especially the collapse of European communism, effectively ended the struggle in Europe, and by the time Gorbachev and President Bush met in Malta in 1989, the Cold War, which had held the world hostage, was over. In 1991, USSR dissolved. These developments fundamentally transformed international politics, significantly with USSR disintegrated and communism no longer a threat, the US had no challenger in its quest for global dominance.

US Nuclear Policy Post-Cold War Era

The fall of the Berlin Wall started a chain reaction that culminated with the disintegration of the USSR and the end of an almost four decades-long Cold War. These events were taken as a decisive victory of Capitalist ideology and liberal democratic values. President Bush proclaimed the need and emergence of a new world order. He and his team faced several challenges in the security realm. Now, instead of one nuclear rival, several nuclear states were in infancy with weak governance structures and unable to adequately maintain and secure their nuclear weapons. These included not only Eastern European and Central Asian states but Russia itself. Poor and almost non-existent nuclear security measures increased the chances of theft of nuclear materials or illicit or accidental use. Another challenge was the future arms control and reduction talks between the US and the erstwhile USSR. Finally, whether the US would change its first-use policy and the extended deterrence to its European allies would remain intact now that the Soviet threat was no more. All these ensued a debate. However, the US continued several arms-controlled measures and engaged in negotiations with the newly independent European and Central Asian states regarding their nuclear weapons, at the same time engaging Moscow in arms reduction talks. Despite all this, the fundamentals of US nuclear policy remained the same as the Bush

administration decided not to take any radical decision such as disarming its nuclear arsenal or changing its nuclear declaratory or use strategy.

Clinton Administration's Nuclear Policy

President Clinton retained the policy of nuclear first use. It was argued that if the US was attacked with nuclear, biological or chemical (NBC) weapons, it might use nuclear weapons in retaliation. In 1995, the US reaffirmed negative security assurance and indicated that Washington might go for the first use of its nuclear weapons against states not in good standing under the Nuclear Non-proliferation Treaty (NPT) or other relevant international treaties or conventions.[24] Further arguing that in case of an attack on the US by any state falling under negative security assurance involving weapons of mass destruction would lose this assurance, and the US might respond in kind.[25] However, the US made it a point not to threaten a non-nuclear state or state who does not attack the US, its allies or strategic interests with NBC weapons. It was termed as a 'studied ambiguity'. Although the US championed the cause of non-proliferation and countering further proliferation, it was among the biggest impediments to the Comprehensive Test Ban Treaty (CTBT) and could not stop India from conducting nuclear tests in 1998.

George Bush's Nuclear Weapons Use Policy

President Bush's nuclear weapons declaratory policy was almost identical to the existing nuclear policy followed by the previous Administration. However, it introduced several new elements and dimensions over time. One of the fundamental principles of this policy, especially during Administration's first terms, was that nuclear weapons were viewed as a cornerstone of American security and its allies.[26]

> *However, one thing that distinguishes Bush administration from the earlier ones and to some extent those that followed it is that the Bush administration assigned a more comprehensive role to nuclear weapons in its military and diplomatic strategy. According to this line of reasoning, the Administration argued that nuclear weapons, along with missile defenses and other elements of the U.S. military establishment, not only* deter *adversaries by promising an unacceptable amount of damage in response to an adversary's attack, they can also* assure *allies and friends of the U.S. commitment to their security by providing an extended deterrent,* dissuade *potential adversaries from challenging the United States with nuclear weapons or other "asymmetrical threats" by convincing them that they can never negate the U.S. nuclear deterrent; and* defeat *enemies by holding at risk those targets that could not be destroyed with other types of weapons.*[27]

Two developments influenced the Bush administration's thinking towards nuclear weapons. First, the terrorist attack on mainland US on September 11 when al-Qaida operatives successfully targeted the twin towers, symbols of American financial might. Second is the State of the Union address of President Bush. During his speech,

President Bush highlighted the existence of an axis of evil. He identified North Korea, Iraq, Libya and Iran as an axis of evil and argued that these states must be reined for US and global security. Added to this was the threat from violent non-state actors. Several terrorist groups, al-Qaida prime among them, were reportedly struggling to acquire nuclear weapons likely to be used against the US and allies or US interests worldwide. To prevent and pre-empt such threats, the traditional method alone would not work, and the US must be willing and ready to strike first using its nuclear weapons against such states so that these cannot attack the US or its allies or its strategic interests globally. According to William Arkin, this resulted in the thinking that there was a space for a pre-emptive nuclear strike against states or even non-state actors who might not have nuclear weapons.[28] Under this pretext, Iraq was falsely accused of building or acquiring nuclear weapons or weapons of mass destruction (WMD) and attacked to ensure its quest for WMDs should be countered before it became successful. Traynor indicates a striking point in this way of thinking, i.e., this change in thinking implies that the US can now use a nuclear weapon at the start or quite early in the conflict.[29]

At the same time, President Bush made the most considerable dent in the nuclear non-proliferation efforts while bypassing international or even US regulations; he signed a nuclear partnership agreement with India, a non-NPT state and was not eligible for such cooperation by providing it with a waiver.

Barak Obama's Nuclear Policy

President Obama started his presidency with a pledge to focus on global disarmament. His Cairo speech was considered a hallmark of this and paved the way for a Noble Peace Prize for him. President Obama argued that in keeping with the prevailing global situation, nuclear terrorism is the most severe threat to global security. He also pledged to lead a multilateral effort to counter this problem and take measures to secure all known vulnerable nuclear material in the next four years.[30] For this, as per the Nuclear Threat Initiative (NTI), he pledged and spent around US $5 billion. Jeffery Smith reported that this amount included the sum provided to Russia and other countries to ensure that they improve their nuclear weapons security mechanisms, properly dispose-off the fuel not used in nuclear weapons, and measures to further enhance physical security and audit of nuclear weapons-related material.[31] During his presidency, significant headway in talks with Iran was made, and both countries reached an agreement.

At the same time, President Obama repeatedly tried to revise US declaratory policy yet was advised to refrain from doing so due to the insecure global environment and pressure from key strategic allies. It is argued that the approach of calculated ambiguity suits the US best, providing American leadership greater ability to manoeuvre and avoid getting stuck.[32]

Donald Trump's Nuclear Policy

President Trump's reckless and contradictory statements raised concerns that such a person had the final say in using the nuclear weapon in the US. For him, nuclear weapons were weapons of last resort,[33] yet he openly threatened North Korea. He retorted that North Korea would be subjected to fire and fury the world had not witnessed before.[34] He was convinced that US nuclear weapons were in very bad shape,[35] yet he also stated that US nuclear weapons were stronger than ever before.[36] President Trump expanded the task of nuclear weapons and their role in ensuring US national security. Although the Trump administration stated that nuclear weapons are weapons of last resort and can only be used under extreme situations to safeguard US national security and of its allies,[37] the definition of such extreme circumstances included nuclear as well as conventional attacks on the US and its global partners or its strategic interests.

However, the most alarming was the Trump administration's policy of using nuclear weapons in case of a nuclear terror attack. As per this policy, the US would hold any state that directly or indirectly appears to support a violent non-state actor's pursuit to get hold of and use a nuclear device fully responsible for its actions.[38]

Joe Biden's Nuclear Policy

President Biden's statements during the presidential campaign set the expectation bar considerably high as many anticipated that he would fulfil his promise of adopting the sole purpose policy and when and how nuclear weapons could be used. It was also a puzzle why the Biden administration took longer than usual to work out its NPR. White House submitted NPR to US Congress on March 28, 2022.[39] The US Department of Defence issued a one-page summary, yet the declassified version was not released as per the standard practice. It is generally believed that this delay was due to a dispute on the fate of the Submarine-launched Cruise Missile (SLCM-N). More than six months after sharing NPR with Congress,[40] the Biden administration finally released its NPR on October 27, 2022.[41] Surprisingly, several issues discussed in NPR are opposed to the views expressed by President Biden during his presidential campaign, especially about policy issues such as the sole-purpose debate and the no-first-use policy. According to Hans Kristensen and Matt Korda:

> *From an arms control and risk reduction perspective, the NPR is a disappointment. Previous efforts to reduce nuclear arsenals and the role that nuclear weapons play have been subdued by renewed strategic competition abroad and opposition from defence hawks at home.*[42]

Salient Features of Biden's Nuclear Posture Review

This NPR identifies China, Russia, Iran and North Korea as the four nuclear adversaries. Identification of these countries as nuclear rivals or targets is in accordance with US global and regional interests. According to NPR, the US would

face two adversarial nuclear weapons states for the first time in its history by the 2030s. As regards China, the document holds that Chinese nuclear weapons would provide it with an edge over US allies in its neighbourhood and the region.[43] NPR is most direct and blunt regarding North Korea. It explicitly declares that under no conceivable scenario North Korea can use nuclear weapons against the US, its interest and its allies and survive.[44]

It is prurient to see Iran listed as one of the nuclear adversaries of Washington as it is neither a nuclear weapon state nor, according to US's admission, building one. This inclusion can only be understood through realpolitik, and NPR states countering Tehran's efforts to build a nuclear bomb as its key objective. [45] As per the document, the following is assigned as a fundamental role of US nuclear weapons:

> *The fundamental role" of U.S. nuclear weapons is to deter a nuclear attack on the United States or its allies and partners. "While the United States maintains a very high bar for the employment of nuclear weapons," the NPR states that the U.S. nuclear posture "is intended to complicate an adversary's entire decision calculus, including whether to instigate a crisis, initiate armed conflict, conduct strategic attacks using non-nuclear capabilities, or escalate to the use of nuclear weapons on any scale." 46*

As per NPR, three specific roles are assigned for US nuclear weapons: to deter and counter any aggression against the US, to assure and provide security to allies and partners, and, if and when deterrence fails, to achieve US objectives. It was stated that in keeping with an extensive audit of the strategic situation, it was concluded that, at present, opting for a policy of no first use would be detrimental to US National security and would raise the risk at an unacceptable level not only for the US but also for its allies. [47]

Nuclear Declaratory Policy and Force Modernization

NPR points out that US nuclear weapons would only be used to deter a nuclear attack on the US, and in such an extreme occurrence, the aim would be ending the conflict with a minimum level of damage.[48] At the same time, it pledges that the US would not use its nuclear weapons against NPT member states; however, it would not apply to states outside NPT and might be involved in a strategic attack against the US.[49] Nonetheless, the US would ensure that if such an eventuality occurs, its nuclear use remains within the Law of Armed Conflict (LOAC), implying that the US will not purposely threaten to attack or attack population centres or non-military targets.

Washington has pledged to continue modernising its nuclear infrastructure, especially its forces and the Command, Control, Communications, Computers, Intelligence, Information, Surveillance and Reconnaissance systems (C4I2SR). For this, the focus would be on a nuclear modernisation programme and retirement or cancellation of projects that do not fit this, such as the Nuclear Sea-launched Cruise Missile (SLCM-N) and B83-1 Megaton Gravity Bomb. It is decided to focus more on capabilities such as W76-2, F-35A fighter aircraft, air-launched cruise missiles and

strategic bombers.[50] This extensive modernisation programme will cost around US $634 billion in the coming decade. [51]

Arms Control and Non-proliferation

President Biden and his team in NPR have reiterated their commitment to non-proliferation and arms control. It states that Washington would continue to pursue a comprehensive and balanced approach to the issue of non-proliferation and its policy on arms control. It extends a commitment to work towards minimising the role of nuclear weapons globally. For this, it argues that mutually acceptable and demonstrable arms control measures would be the most trusted and responsible path to minimising the role of nuclear weapons in overall US security. It pledges continued US support for non-proliferation efforts such as CTBT, FMCT and NPT. It also shows a willingness to negotiate with Russia for a new START. [52]

US Commitments to its Allies

NPR pledges its support to US allies such as Japan, South Korea, Australia and European states. In keeping with contemporary developments, the US extends its deterrence assurances to them and would continue to support NATO as a viable military alliance and maintain its nuclear deterrence capability. It also advocates establishing a credible and robust nuclear deterrence in the larger Indo-Pacific (Asia-Pacific) region to counter the Chinese threat. [53]

Conclusion

In June 2021, the Biden administration announced that it would conduct a nuclear posture review. It was also announced that, in this review, the main objective would be to understand and examine the role of nuclear weapons in overall US strategy and how this role could be minimised.[54] The preliminary security guidelines[55] provide ample ground to be optimistic; however, when NPR was finally released, it offered nothing new or extraordinary.

For quite some time now, in policy and strategic circles, there has been a debate on US nuclear weapon use policy, the so-called policy of calculated ambiguity. American experts have long debated the merits and demerits of this policy of calculated ambiguity. A significant segment of the strategic community in the US is convinced that it has served US national security objectives and should be continued. The other group that argues for a change in the existing policy could be divided into the advocates of three possible alternatives: existential threat,[56] no first use[57] and sole purpose.[58] The debate about the pros and cons of each of these alternatives is intense and intensive and still going on, and the jury is still out on which of these might be the best alternative if the White House ever decides to review the current policy of calculated ambiguity.

While the Biden administration was working on its NPR, experts in the US and worldwide pondered on several questions that they believed would set the course of Biden's nuclear policy. Prime amongst these was whether President Biden would be willing or in a position to change US declaratory policy. It was vital because he indicated in the past that he believed that the only purpose of the US nuclear bomb was to deter and, if need be, to retaliate against a nuclear attack and that, as the president of the US, he would put this into practice.[59] Equally important was whether President Biden could consider the numbers factor and cap the number of nuclear weapons for the US in keeping with its current and projected threat perception. Moreover, how much of President Trump's decisions would he be able to uphold, especially those such as the low-yield weapons development programme? It is argued that answers to such questions would set his nuclear policy and decide his presidency's legacy. However, suppose his overall policy performance, especially foreign policy is something to go by; in that case, one tends to agree with noted American analyst Fareed Zakaria that he might continue with the "overall foreign policy… started by the Trump administration with no significant policy changes to show for himself."[60]

In keeping with the above, President Biden's NPR was hardly a surprise as it did not offer anything out of the box and held its standard, avoiding any controversial policy decision. One thing that can be gauged from this brief overview of US nuclear policy is that nuclear weapons play a significant role in US security and defence policy, which is unlikely to change. Nuclear weapons have played a central and more visible role in the US's security policy throughout the Cold War; post-Cold War, not much changed in Washington's nuclear policy as it neither altered its targeting policy nor reduced the numbers of its nuclear weapons. Since 9/11, it has developed a new justification and rationale for developing more and new nuclear weapons. Therefore, it is hardly surprising for students of nuclear proliferation trends that despite repeated promises and proclamations, President Obama could not reduce the number of US stockpiles and stayed out of the treaty of the abolition of nuclear weapons.

Notwithstanding the hullaballoo, and for being aggressive bordering to be brash, tough signalling and posturing and the decision to further expand US nuclear weapons, including low-yield nuclear weapons, in its core principle and thinking, even Trump's nuclear policy in its nature and character, was hardly any different from his predecessors. In keeping with President Biden's domestic and foreign policies thus far, realising that his nuclear policy is continuing the same is unsurprising, and it is no surprise that he could not make true of his campaign promises. One obvious thing is that with the projection of China and Russia as the primary threat and the Sino-US tussle for global dominance, it is unlikely that the US would lower its nuclear guard.

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