Biden Administration and Future of Arms Control

The world is looking at President Biden with the hope that he would put an end to Trump’s isolationist and disruptive approach to domestic as well as global affairs. After President Trump’s reclusive policy approach, Biden’s administration faces the challenge of reviewing US policies on several fronts including political, diplomatic, military, economic, healthcare, and alike. Among the critical global challenges, arms control is one of the major and focused areas that determine how the US reshapes its relations with other major powers and allies in finding collective solutions to common threats.

Extension of START

In their first exchange, President Joe Biden and Russian President Vladimir Putin agreed to expand the New Strategic Arms Reduction Treaty (START). The extension of New START was a major issue for the critical US-Russia strategic relations because the Treaty was due to expire in February 2021.

The US and Russia’s last existing nuclear arms treaty is on track for a five-year extension. Putin wanted Russian parliamentary approval, which he got on January 27, 2021. President Trump wanted to expand the Treaty into a trilateral arrangement by including China as a third tier.

Officials, under the Biden administration, understand that China may not be convinced to join the New START. However, they acknowledge that the expansion and modernization of China’s nuclear forces is an important development to focus on.

The five-year extension of New START would help build healthier momentum for the arms control policy of the new US administration and would help restore the country’s credibility on arms control issues.

Why isn’t TPNW fully supported by nuclear states?

This development and Biden’s plan to use New START as a framework for crafting future agreements also highlights the prospect of decreasing horizontal nuclear proliferation. However, vertical nuclear proliferation is still likely to continue, despite the on-going debate on the Treaty on the Prohibition of Nuclear Weapons (TPNW).

The refusal, of nuclear-armed states, to support TPNW by citing similar justification is interesting in a way that it indicates their similar interests of retaining their existing nuclear weapons yet their unclear justifications highlight the lack of substantive disarmament commitment these states claimed under the NPT’s Article VI.

The main argument of nuclear-armed against TNPW states that they advocate a step-by-step, gradual approach towards nuclear disarmament unlike TPNW’s agenda of sudden, complete
disarmament. This stance allows them to modernize their arsenals and buy more time in maximizing long-term technological advancements.

In contrast, non-nuclear-weapon states are pressing nuclear-armed states to fulfill their nuclear disarmament commitments. Nuclear-armed states’ position, particularly the position of P5 states, has given another blow to non-nuclear-weapon NPT signatories to reconsider their decades’ long trust in P5 states’ nuclear disarmament assurance.

Additionally, it has somehow validated the decision of three non-NPT nuclear-armed states—India, Pakistan, and Israel—when and why they went nuclear disregarding P5 states’ assurance of nuclear disarmament under the NPT provisions.

Also, the modernization and expansion of nuclear arsenals are also tantamount to the lowering of nuclear thresholds. Hence, it is necessary for the Biden administration to consider a more prudent stance towards TPNW that is consistent with its NPT disarmament commitment without giving up the trust of United States’ allies as result.

On the other hand, the leading proponents of arms control in the US are encouraging the Biden administration to return to the JCPOA agreement which could be one likely and significant aspect of upcoming developments in arms control.

**Should the US reject TPNW?**

The revival of multilateral diplomacy and greater reliance on international institutions on global challenges will help the US in pursuing its stated arms control agenda. Although in the case of New START’s extension, a bilateral approach was understandable, considering the nature of the Treaty and its state parties. However, the rejection of TPNW will weaken the US’ ability to advance its future arms control policy as well as the trust of its allies.

The TPNW has been ratified by 122 states, while all the nuclear-armed states have rejected it. The US can rebuild its global stature by pursuing a more conciliatory approach that allows the TPNW party states and non-party US allies to sit together and progress beyond the current polarized positions.

The US and its allies should negotiate and explore options that allow them to continue nuclear cooperation in a manner that does not defeat the spirit and purpose of TPNW or the ultimate disarmament goal or force its signatory states to review their own non-proliferation commitments.

Although emerging technologies and Great Powers’—US, Russia, and China—advancing and rearmament postures make the future of arms control less conciliatory in nature yet after New START’s formal mutually agreed extension and US ‘likely return to JCPOA; a constructive engagement with the TPNW through multilateral diplomacy could help the US improve its global stature and improve its credibility within the arms control regime.
It will also help build greater confidence within the nuclear ‘have-nots’ in the disarmament commitment of the nuclear ‘haves’. Otherwise, the nuclear have-nots can also review their own decades’ long non-proliferation commitments.

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