

UNVEILING DUALITIES: US RHETORIC AND REALITY IN GLOBAL NUCLEAR NON-PROLIFERATION UNDER TRUMP AND BIDEN ADMINISTRATIONS

*Asma Rashid and Aiman Saif Ullah**

Abstract

The image the United States has always projected of itself in the international community is that of a state that is nuclear responsible and bears the responsibility to keep nuclear proliferation in check. To this effect, it uses sanctions, international pressure, and harsh language with states it deems to be in violation of the obligations of the global nuclear non-proliferation regime. On the other hand, however, there is doubt about the United States' own dedication to the cause of nuclear non-proliferation. This paper is an attempt to examine the role the US has played vis-à-vis nuclear proliferation. It deals with the question: what role US has played in promoting nuclear non-proliferation and what its probable effects are on the international nuclear non-proliferation landscape. It argues that the US has not only engaged in excessive nuclear proliferation since 1945 but has also damaged the international nuclear non-proliferation regime, thereby reduced restraints, and set dangerous precedence for other states. The paper recommends that US may lead the world towards nuclear non-proliferation and disarmament by example rather than unfair coercion.

Keywords: Nuclear Non-Proliferation, Non-Proliferation Regime, Arms Control, Nuclear Posture Review, Nuclear Arms Race.

Introduction

In October 2022, American President Joe Biden remarked that Pakistan was “one of the most dangerous nations in the world” because it possessed “nuclear weapons without any cohesion.”¹ His words met with protest from the Pakistani side claiming that Pakistan had a secure nuclear program posing no threat to any nation. Such words coming from the US President were considered irresponsible and ill-advised. As a matter of fact, US has always failed to play its due role by exacerbating the nuclear risk. Instead, it has always posed not only to be a nuclear responsible state but also the leader that works to reduce nuclear weapons. In the same address in which Biden disparaged Pakistan, he claimed that “the world is looking to us” to figure out solutions to the nuclear threat². A decade ago in 2009, President Obama had also condemned the proliferation of the “ultimate tools of destruction” in his famous

¹Dr. Asma Rashid is a Lecturer, Department of Politics and International Relations, Faculty of Social Sciences (Female), International Islamic University, Islamabad. Aiman Saif Ullah is a graduate of Department of Politics and International Relations, International Islamic University, Islamabad. The author(s) can be reached at asma.rashid@iiu.edu.pk.

Prague speech, while endowing upon his country the “moral responsibility” to check the proliferation and usher in a nuclear-weapon-free world.³

On the flip side, the US possesses the world’s largest stockpile of nuclear armaments. On the other hand, it also claims of moral responsibility to prevent the manufacture and transfer of nuclear technology, a hypocritical cover for a policy of preventing other states from catching up with it in terms of military power. The American rhetoric of pursuing proliferation and denying others the right to do so can be seen as an embodiment of “do as we say, not as we do”. The truth of the matter is that the behavior of the US in the past and in the present by no means is of nuclear-responsible.

The purpose of this paper is to discuss the role the US has played in aggravating the nuclear threat by pursuing armaments itself and by weakening the international non-proliferation regime, i.e., a system of agreements, arrangements, verification tools, and international norms aimed at hindering the spread of WMDs.⁴ It briefly discusses the history of nuclearization done by the US before expanding upon the nuclear posture of the last American president, Donald Trump, and the effect he had on the global non-proliferation regime. The article concludes with a word on the impact of current President Joe Biden’s nuclear policies.

Theoretical Foundation

This paper bases its arguments on the neo-realist theory of international relations. Realist theorists prefer national security and state survival over everything, and it forms the normative core of realism. According to them, international relations is primarily a quest between the major powers for dominance and security. Accordingly, they look skeptically at the liberal assumptions that states are capable of setting aside their self-interests and cooperating where their common interests are involved.⁵ States, according to their claims, only cooperate when it serves their national interests. This implies that they will stop cooperating if it does not promote their interests. Neorealists are also pessimistic about the effectiveness of international institutions and norms in ensuring cooperation among states regarding collective good. In their view, the primary objective of the foreign policy of a state is to preserve and further the interests of the state. All international laws can be set aside by independent states for the national interests.⁶

An Overview of US Nuclearization

In the 1930s, the discovery of atomic energy’s immense power potential prompted several nations, including Germany, the US, Britain, and the USSR, to explore its military applications.⁷ The US took the lead, becoming the first country to develop and use nuclear weapons, dropping two atomic bombs on Japan, forcing its surrender, and marking a pivotal moment in history. This event instilled a global fear of self-inflicted annihilation. The US’ pursuit of nuclear superiority led to a dangerous

arms race with the USSR, characterized by increasingly powerful nuclear tests and space militarization efforts.

In the 1980s, the US intensified military modernization, including the Strategic Defense Initiative. Despite a halt in new nuclear production after the Cold War, the US continued weapon modifications. While engaging in non-proliferation treaties, only SALT-I and START treaties achieved enduring success, with the latter extending in 2021. However, the US' commitment to nuclear disarmament remains questionable. Reports indicate substantial spending on a new nuclear weapon, scheduled for deployment by 2029. Additionally, the US withdrew from the ABM Treaty in 2002, which dealt blows to international stability. The US' historical trajectory in nuclear arms development underscores global concerns about the potential for catastrophic consequences. Despite participating in various non-proliferation treaties, the US' actions have often contradicted the spirit of these agreements, raising doubts about its commitment to global nuclear disarmament efforts.

Today, the US possesses the world's largest nuclear stockpile along with Russia, and the best delivery systems in the world in terms of number and sophistication. In addition, it has always cut some slack to its allies. In violation of Articles I and II of the NPT, the US practices nuclear sharing within NATO in addition to assurances of nuclear deterrence to its North Atlantic allies. Turkey, Belgium, Italy, the Netherlands, and Germany hold approximately 180 American nuclear gravity bombs. Currently, they are controlled by the US forces, however, in case of war, the US NPT obligations will stand overturned, and those weapons may be released to allies.⁸ Between 2005 and 2008, the US took pain to make the Nuclear Suppliers Group (NSG), a body that overlooks nuclear exports, to exempt India from the rules applied to other states that had not signed the NPT which asked them to put all of their nuclear facilities under international safeguards. The resulting agreement allowed nuclear trade with India, as well as spared India from the need to observe comprehensive IAEA safeguards.⁹ This example of selective non-proliferation not only trashed the arms control regime which had taken years to develop but also created a bad precedence for other states seeking nuclear weapons.¹⁰ The US has always turned a blind eye towards the nuclear capabilities of Israel.¹¹

Nuclear Non-Proliferation under President Trump's Administration

The above discussion shows that the US has never been the kind of nuclear-responsible state it claims to be. Yet, the 2016 – 2020 presidency of Donald Trump hurt the global non-proliferation efforts even more.

Trump's Nuclear Policy Proposals: The 2018 Nuclear Posture Review

The Nuclear Policy Review is a document published by the US Department of Defense in 1994. As the name suggests, it outlines each incumbent administration's

approach to nuclear weapons. It clearly declares the administration's official nuclear policy and intentions. Generally, NPRs also give the role the US intends to play in nuclear non-proliferation efforts at the global level. Although the NPR is not an operational document, it has longstanding effects on the US nuclear policies and programs because the concerned departments and agencies use it as a guide.¹²

Donald Trump's administration released its Nuclear Policy Review in February 2018. Even before he assumed office, fears existed about the reins of the US going into 'dangerous' hands. In addition to his plans regarding migrants, Muslims, women, and the Mexican issue, his views on nuclear weapons were not comforting either. He believed in ruling through fear¹³, declared his love for war¹⁴, and lamented the fact that the US did not use its nuclear weapons. In his words, "Why have them if we can't use them?"¹⁵ His Nuclear Policy Review only accentuated the concerns regarding his nuclear views.

The nuclear policy of his predecessor, Obama, was considered to be more pragmatic. On the one hand, he initiated the modernization of the US nuclear arsenals, on the other hand, he strived to strike a balance.¹⁶ Under his policy, nuclear weapons were to be used only as a deterrent, and he supported decreasing dependency on the nuclear arsenals.¹⁷ In his famous 2010 Prague speech, he emphasized the need to eradicate nuclear weapons, envisaged a world free of the nuclear threat, and expressed his country's willingness to lead in the realization of such a world. Some commentators regarded his remarks as a 'non-proliferation pivot.'¹⁸

Trump's Nuclear Posture Review, the longest to date, largely supported the modernization program proposed by the Obama administration. Yet, it differed from Obama's policy in significant ways. The 2018 NPR saw nuclear weapons as the only reliable form of deterrence, despite Obama's intention to reduce reliance on them. NPR 2018 proposed two new missile systems, capabilities for urgent expansion of the nuclear arsenal, training the conventional forces to fight along with the nuclear ones, and preparing the nuclear weapons deployed in Europe to be used for more than symbolic reasons.¹⁹

Though Obama too was reluctant to commit to these policies, the 2018 NPR clearly ruled out both the "sole purpose" and "no first use" policies. It heavily and repeatedly emphasized the willingness to use nukes to deter 'non-nuclear strategic attacks,' while not giving any clarification as to the exact nature of such attack²⁰. This ambiguity left room for including, for instance, a large-scale cyber-attack against US infrastructure as enough of a circumstance to initiate a nuclear response.²¹

One of the most worrisome recommendations was regarding the introduction of shorter-range, lower-yield submarine capabilities²². For context, according to some strategists, the current US nuclear arsenal is so powerful that it leaves an exploitable gap in American nuclear strategy, i.e., the US may never be able to use its nuclear weapons because of the sheer loss and damage they would unleash on the planet. This might lead the rivals to view the threat of nuclear retaliation from the US as less

credible. These strategists believe that lower-yield weapons installed on the US' most effective delivery system, i.e., submarines, would be enough to fill this gap.²³ Trump administration seemed to share this view in its NPR. Critics believed that such capabilities would reduce the nuclear threshold, render nuclear technology more usable, and nuclear attacks in the event of war more likely²⁴. The fact cannot be overlooked that even the lower-yield nuclear weapons would be, after all, nuclear technology, much more lethal than traditional ones and will result in radioactive contamination.²⁵

To make a case for such proposals, NPR painted a dark picture of the world. Through misleading charts and numbers, it tried to prove that the rivals of the US, i.e., Russia, China, and North Korea, may take over the US due to their fast-growing nuclear capabilities. The intention is not to work on reducing the nuclear risk, but rather to engage ever more vigorously in the nuclear competition. Even as the Review stated that it "is not intended to, nor does it enable, nuclear warfighting", the proposals made in it, as discussed above, made nuclear war-fighting more probable. Although, it indicated the US' willingness to comply with and lead the NPT regime, it did not clarify the ways in which such claims would be actualized. Arms control was briefly and dismissively mentioned at the end. The tone and content of the NPR only seemed to fuel rather than reduce the nuclear dangers.²⁶ It only served to actively accelerate the arrival of the dangerous nuclear world it predicted.

The 2018 NPR, when read alongside the careless nuclear posture expressed by Trump on social media, seemed even more grim. Trump's statements on Twitter are not synonymous of formal American policy; the personal thoughts of the leader of world's most powerful state cannot be ignored as mere words, especially as they fell along the lines of formal nuclear policy expressed in the NPR. In December 2016, he tweeted until the globe comes to its senses about nuclear weapons, the US must dramatically consolidate and extend its nuclear capabilities.²⁷ In August 2017, amid escalating nuclear tensions with North Korea, he tweeted statements such as 'As President, my first order of business was to refurbish and modernize our nuclear arsenal, he said and there will never be a moment when we are not the world's most powerful nation. These comments come a day after he threatened North Korean threats with "fire and fury like the world has never seen".²⁸ In January 2018, he responded to the North Korean leader's Nuclear Button statement by boasting about possessing a 'much bigger and more powerful' nuclear button which actually worked.²⁹

It is evident that in theory, Trump's nuclear policy was cataclysmic for any prospects of nuclear non-proliferation. Yet, in practice, his administration went several steps ahead of what was laid out in the NPR 2018.

Trump and the Arms Control Regime

Where the US' role in nuclear non-proliferation is concerned, President Trump's aggressive NPR was of no help. However, Trump's policies on the ground

were even more inflammatory and counterproductive to this effect. He not only grew the nuclear arsenal but also undercut the global arms control efforts which had taken decades to be set in place.

The US pledged adherence to the Intermediate Range Nuclear Forces Treaty (INF) in the 2018 NPR.³⁰ It was a watershed moment in the history of arms control when it was signed in 1987. During the decade of 1970s and early 1980s, the 'detente' between the two superpowers, the US, and the USSR seemed to break down as both sides engaged in heavy deployment of missile systems in Europe. INF marked the return of the de-escalation efforts between the two. The two major powers agreed to lower their nuclear arsenals for the first time. The INF advocated for the annihilation of an entire class of nuclear weapons with ranges ranging from 500 to 5,500 km. The treaty held in place and served its purpose for over 30 years, till in February 2019, the US suspended its obligations and withdrew from the Treaty by August of the same year. It cited the noncompliance of Russia as the reason, which, on the contrary, used to blame the US for the same. It also suspended its treaty obligations a day after the US did.³¹

To begin with, the US withdrawal invited a vigorous nuclear arms competition with Russia. It reversed the effects of the treaty, placed Europe at the center of a potential conflict once again, and endangered the whole world with increased chances of nuclear warfare. In addition, it heaved a severe blow to international Arms Control efforts. The INF stood as more than a bilateral agreement between individual parties. Thus, Trump not only undermined nuclear cooperation with Russia alone, but he also undercut a vital pillar in the structure of the global nonproliferation regime. It is expected to weaken the roots of other parts of the regime, such as the NPT and CTBT. In the long run, it might incentivize other countries that do not have Intermediate Range nuclear missiles to develop them. Firstly, other states might feel the need to secure themselves in the resulting arms race between the US and Russia, and secondly, they would feel free of any obligations arising from the norms of appropriate and responsible behaviour at the international level.³²

Another important arms control agreement is the Open Skies Treaty (OST). It was brought about with the initiative and efforts of former US presidents Eisenhower and Bush Sr. signed in 1992 and entered into force in 2002. It was meant to build confidence through transparency among the over 30 participants including the US and Russia. It allows the member states to conduct unarmed flights over each other's territory to inspect atomic arsenals and other military activities using photographic reconnaissance. The United States left the OST in November 2020, leading Russia to leave a year later, in December 2021. As with the INF, both the US and Russia used to accuse each other of violating the treaty obligations by imposing flight restrictions on each other.³³ Instead of resolving their trust issues, President Trump decided to pull out of the Treaty altogether, deepening the mistrust. Since then, both states have been openly developing intermediate range nuclear warheads.

Another example of Trump's antipathy towards arms control measures was his contempt for the New START Treaty with Russia which capped the nuclear weapons deployed by each side. With the ABM and INF treaty scrapped, the New START became the sole surviving arms control agreement between Russia and the US. If terminated, the world's two largest nuclear arsenals would have been freed from any legally binding, verifiable limit for the first time in almost 50 years. Trump held the view that the Treaty was not serving the US well. As its expiration date in February 2021 approached, his administration continuously rebuffed Russia's offers of a five-year extension. Instead, they tried to force Russia to agree to American conditions regarding the Treaty, that too for only a short-term extension³⁴. However, he ran out of time before he could kill the New START, and his successor, Joe Biden renewed the agreement till 2026.³⁵

Another example that illustrates that for Trump, arms control and nonproliferation arrangements held no value. US abandonment of the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action JCPOA (Iran nuclear deal) is an example of that. The pact aimed to limit and delay Iran's nuclear program by easing billions of dollars in international sanctions. It hoped to accomplish this by limiting Iran's uranium enrichment program and other operations. Trump viewed the deal as "horrible" and "one-sided." In 2018, he announced the US detachment from it and re-imposed crippling sanctions on Iran. Since then, the future of the deal has been in jeopardy as Iran has also given up on compliance.³⁶

Trump also failed to place any legal arms controls over North Korea. In fact, since 1960, he is the only American president to not have produced any new nuclear arms control measure. He did the polar opposite.³⁷ In 2021, he lost the presidential office to Joe Biden. Nevertheless, there is no doubt as to the kind of policy he would have embarked upon if allowed to remain as President. Regarding the Russia-Ukraine War in February 2022, he remarked that he would have dealt with Russia by sending US nuclear submarines to patrol its borders.³⁸

Nuclear Non-Proliferation under Joe Biden's Administration

The nuclear strategy of the incumbent President Biden can be considered relatively balanced than Trump's. His administration's long-awaited Nuclear Posture Review, released after nearly two years in office, attempts to balance concepts like deterrence and nuclear modernization with those like arms control and risk reduction. As mentioned earlier, Biden also renewed the New START Treaty with Russia till 2026.³⁹

Yet, Biden cannot be credited for bringing about a positive shift in American nuclear policy. If his NPR does not strengthen Trump's nuclear position, it does not depart from it either. During his presidential campaign, he had strongly vowed to espouse a 'no-first-use' and 'sole purpose' nuclear policy, however, the NPR backed out on the promise.⁴⁰ The plans of trillions of dollars' worth of modernization and the

lower-yield sea-launched weapons proposed by Trump have been left intact. The NPR acknowledges geostrategic competition with China and Russia, characterizing Russia as the short-term and China as the long-term strategic threat. Other than these, Iran and North Korea are identified as adversaries as well.⁴¹ According to the supporters of arms control, he squandered opportunities to shift the US nuclear posture for the better and watered the seeds of a dangerous arms race sown by Trump.⁴²

One of his additions to Trump's legacy of stamping at the nonproliferation regime is the AUKUS pact. To counter Chinese power in the Asia-Pacific, the UK, Australia and the US, signed a trilateral security pact under which Australia would get not just nuclear-powered submarines but also the nuclear technology to build its own. China, as expected, reacted negatively, and accused the three countries of possessing a 'cold-war mentality' and of triggering a nuclear race.⁴³ Indeed, the AUKUS pact is a dangerous precedent that will have far-reaching consequences where nonproliferation is concerned.

The AUKUS pact, coupled with the Biden administration's nuanced nuclear policy, highlights the complexities of global nuclear politics. The agreement, on the one hand, demonstrates the US commitment to upholding its military might and guaranteeing the safety of its allies in the face of escalating geopolitical threats. However, it also raises questions about how regional arms competitions may be started and how nonproliferation standards might be compromised. It becomes crucial to strike a careful balance between preserving strategic allies, discouraging possible adversaries, and respecting the principles of disarmament and nonproliferation as the international community struggles with these concerns.

This reveals a double standard in the American strategy, allowing its allies to benefit from nuclear technology transfers and punishing its adversaries. It is feared that eventually, non-nuclear states may follow the dangerous precedent set by Australia while utilizing the double standards argument to evade international condemnation. In the past, countries like Iran have justified their nuclear programs by comparing themselves with states like Japan and Germany which possess peaceful nuclear enrichment programs. Moreover, Australia would be the first state to exploit a loophole in IAEA's (International Atomic Energy Agency) standards, i.e., it would remove the nuclear material used in its submarines from the Agency's inspection. This step would set an example for other proliferating states to do the same without attracting a strong international response.⁴⁴

Going forward, the changing face of nuclear strategy necessitates careful diplomacy, openness, and strong international collaboration. The focus should be on advancing nuclear disarmament programs, reviving arms control agreements, and having meaningful conversations with both allies and adversaries. The globe must abandon Cold War mindsets and unite behind a shared vision for a more secure and safer future. Multilateral institutions like the United Nations and the International Atomic Energy Agency play a crucial role in this situation by opening doors for diplomatic resolution and promoting international confidence. In the end, the way

forward necessitates a renewed dedication to communication, understanding, and the goal of a world in which the threat of nuclear weapons is reduced if not completely removed.

Conclusion

The past and present endeavours of the US contradict its posture as the leader of nuclear nonproliferation efforts. The US aggressively pursued nuclear weapons during and even after the end of Cold War, it remains the world's biggest and most powerful nuclear power. It has also failed to show sincere commitment to global nuclear disarmament efforts. As discussed above, many of its recent policies, such as the installation of limited nuclear weapons on submarines and allowing Australia to possess uninspected nuclear submarines, serve to intensify nuclear competition with China and Russia, pushing the world into a dangerous future with every passing year – a world with more nukes and lesser controls. Not only the US is strengthening its nuclear stockpiles, but it has also incurred permanent harm to the global nuclear weapon reduction efforts by pulling out of several of its nuclear arms-related obligations.

Critically, the US as a nuclear power is not less dangerous than countries like Pakistan, which often finds itself at the receiving end of demeaning remarks and the occasional title of a 'nuclear rogue' state. The election of Trump as the president shows that Pakistan is not the only country where, as the critics claim, nuclear weapons can fall into unsafe hands, in fact, the United States is also capable of electing a person to office who openly boasts about holding a powerful nuclear button. No leader in Pakistan has ever made such careless statements about using nuclear weapons officially or on social media.

To sum up, it can be said that state leaders, especially those of the world's most powerful state, should exercise prudence instead of passing remarks that do not conform to reality and only lead to an escalation in tensions. More importantly, states should focus their attention on their own behaviour when it comes to serious issues such as nuclear proliferation, instead of pointing fingers at others. If the United States claims to be leading in the global nonproliferation agenda, it should act like it. Instead of backtracking on the decades old nuclear arms control measures, it should work to bolster the existing nonproliferation regime. It can lead other NPT recognized nuclear states to comply with the disarmament pillar of the NPT, increasing the chances of compliance. In addition, it should also support the Comprehensive Test Ban Treaty (CTBT). In this regard, rather than declaring and preparing to compete with Russia and China in a war that no one can win, the US should work with them to decrease the nuclear menace that looms large over the world.

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