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The Biden Administration's Geopolitical Tightrope: Restoring Strategic Stability in an Era of Rising Major Power Tensions



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Introduction

In year two of a global pandemic, evidence continues to mount that a period of historic global instability and economic disruption has exacerbated major power tensions that are veering dangerously towards confrontation and potential conflict.

Over the past year-and-a-half, thanks to the support of the Carnegie Corporation of New York, the Richard Lounsbery Foundation, and the Nuclear Threat Initiative, the Center for the Study of the Presidency & Congress has convened a network of Russia and arms control experts alongside its own discussions with Members of Congress and their staff as well as open-source research of U.S., Russian, and Chinese strategic posture.

From these discussions we find a tenuous strategic environment, yet one where Congress can continue to play its important role in fostering arms control and strategic stability.

The State of Tensions

As 2021 draws to a close, Russia is massing nearly 100,000 troops on its border with Ukraine and deploying artillery and drones in support of separatists in direct violation of a 2020 ceasefire agreement, raising alarms about a possible invasion. In a move U.S. officials characterized as “dangerous and irresponsible,” Moscow recently launched an anti-satellite weapon (ASAT) at one of its own outdated satellites, creating an orbiting debris field of at least 1,500 pieces of space junk that threatened the International Space Station, forcing its crew to scramble into escape capsules. The Kremlin also recently closed its permanent mission at NATO headquarters in Brussels after the alliance expelled eight Russian spies, further ratcheting up tensions. Meanwhile, U.S. intelligence officials recently testified before Congress that the Kremlin has done little to rein in ransomware gangs that have targeted critical U.S. infrastructure from sanctuaries inside Russia.

Meanwhile, in the Indo-Pacific, China has ramped up threats and coercion aimed at Taiwan, a U.S. ally that Beijing considers a breakaway province, flying record numbers of warplanes into Taipei’s air defense zone and holding military exercises simulating an invasion of the island. The provocations come as China crushes dissent and individual freedoms in Hong Kong under a new security law, abandoning its pledge to honor a “one country, two systems” arrangement there. U.S. satellites have also recently revealed two previously unknown Chinese missile “fields” where more than 200 silos for nuclear-tipped intercontinental ballistic missiles (ICBMs) are under construction, prompting the Defense Department to warn that Beijing’s nuclear arsenal is on track to triple or even quadruple by the end of the decade, giving it a “first strike” capability for the first time. Recently, China successfully tested a nuclear-capable hypersonic weapon system that orbited the Earth before reentering the atmosphere and maneuvering to its target,

catching the U.S. Intelligence Community by surprise and prompting General Mark Milley, Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, to call the test “very close” to being a “Sputnik moment,” harkening back to the Soviet Union’s launch of the Sputnik satellite in 1957 that helped spark the Cold War’s nuclear arms race.

Indeed, growing tensions in U.S.-Russia-China relations have prompted many experts and historians to draw parallels with the Cold War. Even though it lacks some of the ideological fervor of the Cold War standoff between democratic and communist nation-state blocs, the current era of major power competition divides along the lines separating democracies and authoritarian regimes. On one side are the United States and its democratic allies in Europe and Asia, defending a status quo, rules-based international order driven by the principles of free trade and free political choice. On the other are autocratic and reactionary regimes in Moscow and Beijing willing to use military might and, frequently, coercion of their neighbors to carve out spheres of privileged influence.

Unfortunately, these rising tensions come at a time when the carefully constructed Cold War architecture of nuclear arms control and verification treaties, de-confliction agreements and open communications channels is near collapse. As military provocations increase dramatically, the current era of major power competition actually bears an alarming resemblance to the darkest early years of the Cold War when missteps and miscalculations created existential crises like the Berlin Blockade, the Korean War and the Cuban Missile Crisis, all of which pushed the major nuclear weapons powers to the brink. There is little wonder that the Bulletin of Atomic Scientists has reset its Doomsday Clock to just one hundred seconds to midnight, the closest it has ever been to Armageddon.

Rebuilding Strategic Stability

To its credit, the Biden administration has noted the dangerous downward spiral in major power relations and has taken steps to try to stabilize a roiling geopolitical landscape. Confronted in February 2021 with the imminent sunset of the New START Treaty – the last treaty limiting the size and imposing verification on the nuclear arsenals of the United States and Russia, which possess 90 percent of the world’s nuclear weapons – Biden and Russian President Vladimir Putin extended the treaty for the maximum of five years. The extension gives U.S. and Russian negotiators critical time and breathing room to begin discussing a host of thorny issues that must be addressed in both a follow-on agreement and in broader strategic stability discussions.

The long list of sensitive strategic issues that require agreement includes the implication of new technologies such as hypersonic delivery systems and their inevitable linkages to missile defense systems; possible constraints on antisatellite and other space weaponry, to include a ban on kinetic anti-satellite weapons tests that are befouling the space commons; new norms for ensuring that offensive cyber capabilities are never used to target nuclear command-and-control

or early warning systems, thus destabilizing the balance of nuclear deterrence; possible constraints on long-range conventional weapons that can target and hold at risk nuclear arsenals or command nodes; the inclusion of lower-yield, shorter range “tactical” nuclear weapons, and the linkages to conventional force levels, in follow-on arms control agreements; the need to include China and possibly other nuclear powers such as France and Great Britain in future arms control discussions; and the overall tenor of U.S.-Russian-China relations, including the possibility of lifting some sanctions on Moscow and trade tariffs on Beijing in exchange for positive arms limitation steps.

The Biden-Putin Summit in Geneva in June 2021 was another critical first step towards clearing the air and lowering the temperature of the rhetoric between the two strategic rivals. While some news accounts were critical of the summit for failing to achieve more substantive “deliverables,” there is truth behind Winston Churchill’s characterization of international diplomacy: “to jaw-jaw is always better than to war-war.” Both Biden and Putin emerged from their meeting noting the “positive tone” and “constructive spirit” of the talks.

Perhaps most substantively, the two leaders agreed to launch an ongoing, bilateral “Strategic Stability Dialogue” to lay the groundwork for future arms control treaties and confidence-building agreements. Thus, armed with marching orders from the top, U.S. and Russian delegations met in July and September. After the latest meeting, headed by U.S. Deputy Secretary of State Wendy Sherman and Russia’s Deputy Foreign Minister Sergei Ryabkov, both sides agreed to set up two working groups that will convene ahead of a third plenary meeting on the principles and objectives for future arms control talks. Russian experts convened by CSPC agreed that the lack of leaks and diplomatic jockeying from “anonymous sources” close to the talks is an indication that both sides are taking the dialogue seriously, and the two leaders and their delegations seem intent on trying to insulate the talks from domestic political pressures.

“As a result of the Strategic Stability Dialogue, I would argue that U.S.-Russian relations have in fact stabilized over the past year,” said George Beebe, vice president at the Center for the National Interest, former director of the CIA’s Russia directorate, and author of the book *The Russia Trap: How Our Shadow War with Russia Could Spiral into Catastrophe*. “The fact that President Biden has publicly stated that he wants to find a way to manage the relationship peacefully and put it on a more stable footing is in itself encouraging, and with the Strategic Stability Dialogue he has not only talked the talk but walked the walk. The fact that neither side is publicly depicting the other as a ‘mortal enemy’ any more is also a positive sign.”

In another sign of heightened engagement between the two strategic rivals, CIA Director William Burns, a former U.S. ambassador to Russia, led a delegation of U.S. officials on a two-day visit to Moscow in early November. The visit was at least the fourth trip to Moscow by a senior U.S. official since the Biden-Putin Summit, representing a sharp increase in high-level engagement. The talks reportedly focused on arms control and cybersecurity, specifically

ransomware attacks by Russian criminal gangs. The high-profile visit by CIA Director Burns and President Putin's decision to publicly disclose it were interpreted by Russian experts as a clear indication that both sides want to stabilize a dangerously volatile relationship. There is already talk about a possible second Biden-Putin Summit in 2022.

In November, Biden and Chinese President Xi Jinping similarly conducted a virtual summit that featured no substantive breakthroughs on sensitive issues such as Taiwan, arms control, human rights and trade. As with Russia, however, Biden stressed the need for more regular strategic stability conversations and more "guardrails" to help Washington and Beijing manage an increasingly adversarial and acrimonious relationship between the world's status quo and rising superpowers. Unlike with Russia, U.S. leaders have never had an in-depth conversation with their Chinese counterparts about nuclear capabilities and prudent confidence-building measures, nor is there a "hotline" between their militaries of the type that has existed between Washington and Moscow for decades to avoid strategic misunderstandings and miscalculations.

"As I said before, it seems to be our responsibility – as leaders of China and the United States – to ensure that the competition between our countries does not veer into conflict, whether intended or unintended," Biden told Xi in brief remarks in front of reporters before the summit. "Just simple, straightforward competition. It seems to me we need to establish a common-sense guardrail, to be clear and honest when we disagree and work together where our interests intersect."

New Arms Race

New guardrails and action are urgently needed to avoid adding a runaway nuclear arms race to an already volatile geopolitical competition between the major powers.

In a seminal speech in 2018, President Vladimir Putin revealed the centrality of nuclear weapons to Russia's increasing international aggressiveness by introducing six new nuclear weapons delivery systems then in development, including the now deployed "Avangard" long-range hypersonic glide vehicle, which can reportedly fly 20 times the speed of sound and maneuver in ways that evade U.S. missile defenses, as well as novel weapons such as nuclear-powered torpedoes and cruise missiles with theoretically unlimited range. According to U.S. officials, Moscow has also adopted and exercised a provocative nuclear warfighting doctrine that calls for early use of its large stockpile of lower-yield, tactical nuclear weapons against conventional NATO forces in an "escalate to win" strategy.

In September 2020, U.S. Space Command accused Russia of testing a space-based antisatellite weapon that flew "in abnormally close proximity" to a U.S. satellite. If anything, Moscow's recent kinetic test of an anti-satellite missile that created a field of orbiting space junk that threatened the International Space Station is considered even more provocative and reckless.

The U.S. Justice Department has also announced criminal charges against a team of Russian military intelligence agents for conducting the most disruptive and destructive series of cyberattacks ever attributed to one group, which included attacking Ukraine's power grid in the middle of winter and releasing a mock ransomware computer virus that infected computers around the world and caused billions of dollars in damage. With no agreement among the major nuclear powers to constrain such provocative cyberattacks, the threat is real that one could wreak havoc on early warning and command-and-control systems for nuclear weapons, greatly increasing the danger of a catastrophic nuclear mishap. After a Russian criminal hacking group launched a ransomware attack in 2021 that shut down a major U.S. pipeline network, interrupting gasoline deliveries and sparking panic-buying along the East Coast, Biden told Putin at their June summit that such attacks on critical infrastructure should be "off-limits" to cyberattacks and would no longer go unanswered.

"At the summit Biden essentially gave Putin an ultimatum on cyberattacks, and was reportedly very clear about the need for the United States to respond if they continue," Matt Rojansky, Director of the Woodrow Wilson Center's Kennan Institute and a Russia expert, told CSPP researchers. "The Biden administration considers ransomware attacks a 'threshold issue,' because they reason if the Kremlin is willing to allow a relative handful of criminal hackers to hold relations between the two most powerful nuclear weapons states hostage for a few million dollars, then the Russians are too reckless for normal relations."

Meanwhile, in its annual "China Military Power" report to Congress, the Pentagon initially predicted Beijing will double its stockpile of nuclear warheads over the next decade from its current level of roughly 320 (versus 6,100 and 6,500 for the United States and Russia, respectively). After satellite images recently revealed that China is constructing two new ICBM "fields" of more than 200 silos, the Pentagon recalculated that Beijing is on track to triple or even quadruple its arsenal by decade's end.

"We are witnessing a strategic breakout by China," Admiral Charles Richard, head of U.S. Strategic Command, told a Space & Missile Defense Symposium last August. "The explosive growth and modernization of its nuclear and conventional forces can only be what I describe as breathtaking."

Of major concern to the Pentagon, China has built up the world's largest arsenal of more than 2,000 intermediate range, ground-launched ballistic and cruise missiles, most with conventional warheads but some unknown number "dual capable" of carrying either conventional or nuclear warheads to targets in the Asia Pacific region. Because of the recently abrogated Intermediate-Range Nuclear Forces (INF) Treaty with Russia, the United States has not yet fielded an intermediate range, ground-based nuclear missile.

While China has outpaced the United States in developing and testing hypersonic delivery systems and is arguably abandoning its venerable “minimum deterrence” nuclear doctrine for a more robust “first strike” capability, it has consistently rejected the idea of arms control negotiations because the United States and Russia still deploy roughly five times more nuclear warheads than Beijing possesses. That stance is in keeping with the lessons of the Cold War, where the United States and the Soviet Union primarily engaged in serious arms control negotiations only in areas where there was rough parity in terms of numbers and capabilities of nuclear weapons, with neither side motivated to lock in an inferior position. That suggests that in the short- to mid-term, U.S.-China strategic dialogue will focus on more modest transparency and confidence-building measures designed to avoid mishaps and miscalculations in realms such as cyberspace, space and nuclear doctrine.

“The only reason a nation is willing to sit down with the United States and negotiate arms control is that we have some capability that they wish to limit, and vice versa,” Olga Oliker, program director for Europe and Central Asia at the International Crisis Group, told CSPC researchers. Until China’s arsenal reaches rough parity or the United States is willing to limit superior capabilities we have in areas such as space and missile defense, “there’s not really much to trade or talk about in arms control negotiations,” she said.

For its part the United States is also modernizing its nuclear triad of submarine-launched ballistic missiles, nuclear-capable aircraft, and intercontinental ballistic missiles. The 2018 Nuclear Posture Review called for beginning construction in 2021 of new Columbia-class missile submarines to replace the current Ohio Class “boomers”; replacing current B-2 and B-52 nuclear capable bombers with the new B-21 Raider bomber beginning in the mid-2020s; and developing a replacement for “Minuteman” intercontinental ballistic missiles to be ready by 2029. The Pentagon has also launched a crash program to field its own hypersonic weapons, with testing of a missile capable of flying faster than the speed of sound (Mach 5) already underway, with initial fielding scheduled to begin in 2023.

As noted earlier, there is also growing evidence that the major powers are elevating their arms race into space. Russia’s recent kinetic test of an anti-satellite weapon, following China’s similar 2007 kinetic anti-satellite test and more recent experiments designed to blind U.S. satellites in times of conflict, are just the latest examples of a potentially destabilizing race to weaponize space. The Defense Department’s recent establishment of U.S. Space Command as its “newest warfighting command,” and the adoption of a doctrine of maintaining U.S. military superiority in space, suggests that the United States is also pursuing offensive and defensive antisatellite capabilities in classified programs. A key question is whether the three major powers are interested in avoiding extension of the arms race into space by updating the 1967 Outer Space Treaty, which currently bans only the stationing of weapons of mass destruction (WMD) in outer space and prohibits military activities on celestial bodies.

Nuclear Posture Review

The Biden administration will tip its hand on the proposed balance between arms control and nuclear modernization in the upcoming Nuclear Posture Review (NPR), which is expected in early 2022 and will examine the size, capability, and role of the nation's nuclear arsenal. The report should offer a strong indication of how far Biden intends to move towards his pledge to reduce the role of nuclear weapons in U.S. strategy and to revitalize arms control after the Trump administration withdrew from the Iran nuclear accords and the Intermediate-Range Nuclear Forces (INF) Treaty over alleged Russian cheating.

As did the four previous post-Cold War reviews, the Biden administration's NPR promises to set off an intense debate in Congress between mostly Democratic arms control advocates who want to limit the size, scope and uses of the nuclear arsenal, and mostly Republican hawks who argue that a robust modernization of the triad of nuclear armed ground-based missiles, bombers and submarines is necessary to deter the ambitious nuclear modernization programs of the Russians and Chinese.

In the past, Biden has publicly endorsed the idea of modifying U.S. doctrine to state that the "sole purpose" of the U.S. nuclear arsenal is to deter or retaliate against a nuclear attack. On his campaign website in 2020, Biden reiterated his belief in a "sole purpose" declaration and said as president he would "work to put that belief into practice."

Though such a declaration offers slightly more ambiguity than a declarative "no first use" pledge on nuclear weapons that arms control advocates propose, the Pentagon and many Republican lawmakers argue that it would only embolden China and Russia and dismay allies who depend on the U.S. nuclear umbrella. In a July letter to the Biden White House, 23 GOP members of the House Armed Services Committee warned that the policy would increase the risk of nuclear war.

Other thorny issues surely to be raised by the NPR include whether the Biden administration wants to fully follow through on the robust nuclear modernization program already underway, which the Congressional Budget Office projects will cost \$634 billion over the next decade. Some arms control advocates argue that the U.S. could save significant money by dropping ground-based ICBMs from the triad altogether, noting that they are the most vulnerable to an adversary's first strike. Others have encouraged Biden to cancel the new low-yield, submarine launched warhead approved by the Trump administration to counter Russia's advantage in so-called "tactical" nuclear weapons.

History & Congress's Critical Role

Congressional leaders from both sides of the aisle interested in positively reasserting the institution's critical authorities in strategic issues should grasp the Biden administration's

Strategic Stability Dialogue with Russia and China, and the upcoming issuance of the Nuclear Posture Review, as an opportunity. The House and Senate Subcommittees on Strategic Forces, for instance, have a critical oversight function in ensuring that the Biden administration's NPR has a coherent and defensible strategy for both managing and modernizing strategic nuclear forces and achieving nonproliferation and arms control goals. Through public hearings, Congress also plays an important role in educating the American public and helping build a constituency for thoughtful deterrence and nonproliferation policies. As witnessed by the Senate's 1999 rejection of the Comprehensive Test Ban Treaty (CTBT), and more recent threats by some senators to defund the CTBT's international monitoring system, Congress also has a significant power to negatively impact arms control measures.

"There are less formal actions presidents can take in the realm of arms control short of an actual treaty, like the Obama administration did in modifying deployment of the U.S. missile defense system in Europe prior to New START, but Congress has a critical role to play," James Acton, co-director of the Nuclear Policy Program at the Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, told CSPC researchers. Not only will any follow-on treaty to New START require ratification by a two-thirds vote in the Senate, he notes, but "through its authorization and appropriation authorities Congress can impact the implementation of arms control treaties, both positively and negatively."

Given the current political climate of hyper-partisanship and distrust in Washington D.C., many lawmakers today have little memory of the deep and sustained bipartisanship that was necessary to build the foundation of strategic stability that kept the Cold War dormant for decades. To reclaim its critical role in that process and rekindle a spirit of consensus on strategic issues that will be needed for the Senate to ratify whatever arms control agreement comes after New START sunsets in 2026, Congressional leaders should look to the hopeful example of the Arms Control Observer Group.

After a series of proposed arms control treaties failed to win Senate approval in the 1970s, the Arms Control Observer Group was formed in the 1980s to support President Ronald Reagan's groundbreaking arms control negotiations with the former Soviet Union. It helped build and reinforce the consensus that strategic arms control could advance U.S. interests, and it was supported by President Reagan, Secretary of State George Schultz, and the Majority and Minority leaders of the Senate.

The Observer Group opened critical communications channels between the Senate and the State Department arms control negotiating team at the outset of talks; allowed Group members to report back to their Senate colleagues on treaty negotiations, addressing their concerns and ideas; created a critical pocket of institutional expertise on strategic nuclear issues within the Senate; and met "informally" with counterparts in the Soviet Duma to successfully lower tensions and distrust in a fraught relationship.

As a result of those efforts, every member of the Arms Control Observer Group eventually voted to ratify the Intermediate-Range Nuclear Forces (INF) Treaty and the Strategic Arms Reduction Treaty (START), both of which passed with overwhelming majorities in the Senate. The lowering of tensions and development of trust in U.S.-Soviet relations that flowed from the arms control negotiations were critical factors in ending the Cold War.

After a lull in the 1990s when arms control stalled, the Observer Group was renamed the National Security Working Group, and its writ was broadened to include other strategic issues such as missile defense and export controls. Importantly, the Obama administration revived the Working Group to help successfully pass the New START Treaty in 2010, the last major arms control treaty affirmed by the Senate.

Eventually the impact of the Working Group waned as hyper-partisanship increasingly polarized debate in Congress. Today it is funded to the tune of roughly \$700,000 annually, but its members rarely meet and there are no public records of its deliberations, making it difficult to assess its impact on the strategic dialogue.

With its pledge to build on the foundation of New START and pursue new arms control agreements, the Biden administration has an opportunity to revive the bipartisan spirit of the original Arms Control Observer Group of the 1980s, the Nunn-Lugar Cooperative Threat Reduction Program in the 1990s, and the National Security Working Group of the 1990s and 2000s — all of which fostered greater cooperation within Congress, and between Congress and the Executive Branch, on key national security issues. Congressional leaders should seize that opportunity to re-establish their institution's foreign policy prerogatives and provide both support and oversight of Executive Branch arms control initiatives.

Arms Control and the Current Congress

With his pledge to renew the New START treaty already accomplished, President Biden is now faced with the monumental task of weaving together the various approaches in Congress to nuclear weapons and arms control that exist within his own Democratic Party and the Republican Party alike. Central to the path forward is the general agreement that existing arms control infrastructure is simply insufficient to address the introduction of novel delivery systems by Russia and China—as well as the fact that China's nuclear arsenal is entirely unbound by any bilateral or multilateral agreements with the United States.

While the Biden administration seeks to include China's burgeoning nuclear weapon stockpile and threatening delivery systems in the arms control architecture of tomorrow, the Trump administration's policy approach assigned a much higher priority to bringing China into the arms control fold. However, there was significant concern in the Senate regarding the Trump administration's emphasis on the inclusion of China in the arms control framework already

existing between the United States and Russia without outwardly supporting the extension of New START.

As early in Trump's term as Fall 2018, several Republican lawmakers such as Senator Rand Paul (R-KY) and former Senators Bob Corker (R-TN) and Johnny Isakson (R-GA) expressed interest in ensuring that the United States and Russia would not lose their bilateral arms control infrastructure entirely through the expiration of New START. By late 2020 the Senate Republican Policy Committee and individual Republican Senators, however, increasingly emphasized the need to both include a growing Chinese nuclear arsenal in future arms control negotiations, and to pursue modernization of the U.S. nuclear triad. Leading Republican Senators such as Armed Services Chairman Senator Jim Inhofe (R-OK) and Foreign Relations Chairman Jim Risch (R-ID) generally refused to push for a renewal of New START without a combination of Chinese inclusion and continued modernization efforts. Congressman Jim Banks (R-IN), however, became a leading Republican voice in the House in favor of renewing New START as a foundation of Russian-American nuclear arms control architecture. Banks is co-chair of the Future of Defense Task Force alongside Democratic Representative Seth Moulton (D-MA).

Republican reactions to the Trump administration's decision to withdraw from the Intermediate-Range Nuclear Forces (INF) and Open Skies treaties were largely positive, while Democratic reactions from Congress were largely opposed. Republican leadership in the Senate Foreign Relations and Armed Services Committees and the House Foreign Affairs and Armed Services Committees were broadly supportive of the Trump administration's withdrawal decision, although then-Senate Foreign Relations chair Senator Bob Corker (R-TN) expressed discomfort with a potential collapse of the arms control framework between Russia and the United States. A common thread to Congressional Republican messages of support was the assertion that Russia was not adhering to the terms or spirit of either treaty and that unilateral withdrawal from the treaties was therefore long overdue.

Democratic disapproval of the two treaty withdrawals by the Trump administration frequently acknowledged regular Russian violation of the two treaties' terms yet expressed extreme unease with the rapid tearing down of existing arms control infrastructure. Senator Robert Menendez (D-NJ) and House Speaker Nancy Pelosi (D-CA) both expressed frustration at Russia's continued violation of the INF treaty, but argued that being left with no agreed-upon framework to regulate short- and intermediate-range nuclear missiles would leave the United States in a precarious position. Speaker Pelosi and Senator Jeanne Shaheen (D-NH), a member of the Senate Armed Services Committee, also stated their opposition to an exit from the Open Skies Treaty. They argued that the treaty's value to U.S. policymakers far outweighed the risk of abuse by the Russian military and intelligence establishments.

By the final year of the Trump administration, Democratic support for the renewal of the New START treaty had solidified. Senator Menendez and then-Representative Eliot Engel (D-NY),

who was Chair of the House Foreign Affairs Committee at the time, came out as early proponents of New START renewal in a February 2020 op-ed. Others, such as Senator Dianne Feinstein (D-CA), acknowledged the Trump administration priority of including China in any future arms control framework, but stipulated that this would only be possible after the renewal of New START.

This support for the renewal of New START by Congressional Democrats continued up until the Biden administration's February 2021 decision to renew the treaty for an additional maximum of five years. In the Senate, Senators Menendez and Jack Reed (D-RI) emerged as major proponents of the Biden administration arms control policy of pursuing strategic stability with Russia through additional agreements after the renewal of New START, while also supporting nuclear modernization. Leading House Foreign Affairs and Armed Services Democrats would take a similar position, although House Armed Services Committee Chairman Adam Smith (D-WA) argued in an August 2021 statement that the Biden administration's nuclear modernization efforts should deemphasize costly new weapons systems. The main split in Congressional Democrat ranks is the schism between leading Democrats who believe that New START and further arms control engagement with Russia can coexist with a robust modernization of America's nuclear arsenal, and those who support similar engagement with Russia but oppose the large-scale modernization efforts pursued by the Trump and Biden administrations.

In contrast to more pro-modernization Democratic leaders in Congress, a bicameral Congressional bloc called the Nuclear Weapons and Arms Control Working Group has emerged to oppose high funding levels for nuclear modernization while supporting efforts to impose tight limits on American and Russian nuclear systems. The group is co-chaired by Senators Ed Markey (D-MA) and Ed Merkley (D-OR) as well as Representatives Don Beyer (D-VA) and John Garamendi (D-CA). They differ with Republicans and other Democrats in calling for the cancellation of certain nuclear weapons programs currently under development along with a general deemphasis on nuclear weapons in American strategic planning. The group has also stated its belief in including China in future arms control negotiations, a point of growing consensus. Now that the New START renewal issue has been settled, this split within the Democratic Party on a preferred approach to arms control issues has emerged as the most salient fault line in the arms control debate today.

Much of the political dynamics surrounding arms control policy continue to play out today by way of the amendment process for the FY 2022 National Defense Authorization Act (NDAA). The base text of the 2022 NDAA largely continues the previous Trump-era policy of funding the modernization of the nuclear triad. Staunch Republican opposition to cuts in the nuclear arsenal was evident in Senator John Hoeven's (R-ND) NDAA amendment to prohibit the Biden administration from making cuts to U.S. nuclear forces. Hoeven justified this measure by highlighting the need to counter China's rapid nuclear arsenal expansion. As the Senior Senator from North Dakota, Hoeven represents Minot and Grand Forks Air Force Bases, which host U.S.

nuclear missile batteries and bombers. Senate Minority Leader Mitch McConnell (R-KY) has also given his blessing to efforts to modernize and preserve the current size of the U.S. strategic nuclear arsenal.

Some of the most prolific legislative activity surrounding arms control in the 2022 NDAA has come from arms control proponents and modernization skeptics such as Senator Markey. His submitted amendments include a hold on funding for the Ground Based Strategic Deterrent Project until completion of an independent study on its value as a replacement for the dated Minuteman III missile system and cuts to funding for nuclear modernization efforts in general.

While Republicans and Democrats in Congress disagree on the pace of modernization of the U.S. nuclear arsenal, there appears to be wide agreement supporting continued negotiations on arms control with Russia. While Russian violation of the Chemical Weapons Convention through its poisoning of Alexei Navalny and Sergei Skripal has raised serious doubts about the Kremlin's trustworthiness, there remains bipartisan support in Congress for regulating novel and existing nuclear delivery systems. A growing awareness of the rapid pace of China's nuclear weapons expansion has also generated bipartisan support for including Beijing in future arms control negotiations.

Opportunities Ahead for an Arms Control Agenda?

Given this Congressional consensus on the need for negotiations with Russia and China, the Biden administration has significant maneuvering room in pursuing its arms control agenda. That's especially true given that Russia's Deputy Foreign Minister Sergei Ryabkov has noted that strategic stability discussions are one of the most fruitful spheres of mutual interest between the United States and Russia.

Congressional leaders still must carefully navigate the fault line between those who favor simultaneous pursuit of nuclear modernization and engagement with China and Russia and those who favor eschewing a fast pace of modernization in favor of focusing on securing strict arms control limits. Just as the Obama administration in 2010 had to carefully calibrate its desire for ratification of the New START with Republican demands for robust modernization, so too will the Biden administration have to carefully balance its arms control agenda and strong Republican support for updating an aging nuclear arsenal.

The world is currently living through a period of great instability as it copes with the worst global pandemic since 1918, one of the worst economic shocks since the Great Depression, and the worst tensions in major power relations since the early days of the Cold War. These crises come at a time when the treaties and multilateral institutions that are the foundation of the international order and strategic stability are visibly weakening and in danger of collapse. In the past, such periods of deep economic distress and geopolitical tensions have given rise to dark

political forces and are ripe for confrontation among nation-states. History will not judge kindly American political leaders who stood complacent while a runaway nuclear arms race was added to that already volatile mix.