

Congress of the United States
Washington, DC 20515

March 2, 2021

The Honorable Joseph R. Biden
President of the United States
1600 Pennsylvania Avenue, N.W.
Washington, DC 20500

Dear Mr. President:

We write to commend your early steps to declare that “America is back” and your pledge to make diplomacy a centerpiece of your presidency. Building upon your decision to extend the New Strategic Arms Reduction Treaty (New START) with Russia, we ask your Administration to take additional steps to restore U.S. global nuclear nonproliferation leadership after four years of President Trump’s “America First” foreign policy. We hope that your policies, diplomatic initiatives, and budget requests will advance the dual missions of reducing the role and number of nuclear weapons and reestablishing U.S. leadership to reduce nuclear risks.

Although the Obama administration made progress in limiting the purpose of nuclear weapons to deterring or responding to nuclear attacks, the Trump administration reversed this progress. Prior to the release of President Trump’s 2018 Nuclear Posture Review, the Government Accountability Office (GAO) raised affordability concerns about the Obama administration’s plan to spend approximately \$1.7 trillion dollars through Fiscal Year (FY) 2046 (adjusted for inflation) on new nuclear weapons modernization and infrastructure programs.¹ President Trump elevated this unsustainable rate of spending. As the GAO concluded, the belief that the modernization plan is affordable “is predicated on optimistic assumptions” about available funding, while realistic planning would include options for “deferring the start of or cancelling specific (nuclear) modernization programs.”²

The United States can retain a safe, secure, and effective nuclear deterrent which is also affordable and enhances our national security. In making necessary changes to the U.S. nuclear posture and force structure, your Administration can best reflect the hard, cold reality that there is no such thing as a winnable nuclear war. To that end, we urge your Administration to take the following actions through your FY2022 budget request and any subsequent policy review(s) in order to reduce the role and number of U.S. nuclear weapons:

¹ *National Nuclear Security Administration: Action Needed to Address Affordability of Nuclear Modernization Programs*, GAO-17-341. (Apr. 26, 2017), <https://www.gao.gov/products/GAO-17-341>.

² Edward J. Markey, *Senators Markey and Feinstein Request GAO Study on Affordability of Nuclear Weapons Enterprise* (Feb. 27, 2020), <https://www.markey.senate.gov/news/press-releases/senators-markey-and-feinstein-request-gao-study-on-affordability-of-nuclear-weapons-enterprise>.

1. **Stop the development and deployment of President Trump's two new types of nuclear weapons.** The Navy's 2019 deployment of the lower-yield W76-2 warhead on U.S. ballistic missile submarines risks lowering the U.S. threshold for nuclear weapons use. If deployed, the Trump-proposed new sea-launched cruise missile (SLCM-N) creates similar risks. The United States already fields a variety of lower-yield nuclear weapons, as well as conventional options that can achieve the same mission as that sought for new weapons.³ We urge a swift decision by your Administration to withdraw the low-yield W76-2 warhead from deployment and cancel the SLCM-N.
2. **Make it U.S. policy not to use nuclear weapons first in a conflict and invite other nuclear weapons powers to adopt a similar policy declaration.** President Trump's chaotic tenure in office personified the danger of vesting in one person the sole power to authorize the use of nuclear weapons while retaining the option to use nuclear weapons first. In 2017, you stated that it was difficult for you to envision a circumstance in which using nuclear weapons first would be necessary or make sense.⁴ We agree and urge you to formally declare that the United States will not fire the first shot in a nuclear war. Additionally, we urge you to implement changes to U.S. nuclear launch protocols so that no president possesses the cataclysmic power to end millions of lives instantaneously.
3. **Review and scale back the current program of work to sustain and modernize the U.S. nuclear weapons enterprise — expected to total \$500 billion between FY 2019-2028.**⁵ As we saw in President Trump's final budget proposal, which cut a Virginia Class nuclear-submarine to pay for unplanned cost increases at the National Nuclear Security Administration (NNSA), the staggering growth of the modernization budget will force even harder tradeoffs amid flat — at best — discretionary defense budgets in future years.⁶ Fortunately, the United States can deter adversaries and assure allies without expending the entirety of the nearly \$2 trillion contemplated over the next three decades for the nuclear arsenal.
4. **Pause further development of a new Intercontinental Ballistic Missile (ICBM) known as the Ground-Based Strategic Deterrent (GBSD).** At an acquisition cost of about \$100 billion and an estimated total life-cycle cost of \$260 billion, a new ICBM system would

³ Hans Kristensen, *US Deploys New Low-Yield Nuclear Submarine Warhead*, Federation of American Scientists (Jan. 29, 2020), <https://fas.org/blogs/security/2020/01/w76-2deployed/>.

⁴ Joseph R. Biden, *Remarks by the Vice President on Nuclear Security*. (Jan. 11, 2017), <https://obamawhitehouse.archives.gov/the-press-office/2017/01/12/remarks-vice-president-nuclear-security>.

⁵ *Projected Costs of U.S. Nuclear Forces, 2019 to 2028*, Congressional Budget Office. (Jan. 24, 2019), <https://www.cbo.gov/publication/54914>.

⁶ *Pentagon Will Foot Bill for NNSA's 2021 Budget Plus-Up, Report Says*, Exchange Monitor. (Feb. 7, 2020), <https://www.exchangemonitor.com/pentagon-will-foot-bill-nnsas-2021-budget-plus-report-says/>.

divert limited resources from higher priority needs.⁷ We instead encourage you to pause funding for GBSD and look to the viable alternative of extending the existing Minuteman III ICBM until at least 2050, while freeing up tens of billions of dollars for other priorities. We also have concerns about comments in the press that appear to get out ahead of policy decisions your Administration may be reviewing. Admiral Charles Richard⁸, Commander, U.S. Strategic Command and Michael Lutton⁹, Commander, U.S. Air Force Global Strike Command, appear to believe the outcome of your Administration's review — policy decisions explicitly under your purview — is predetermined. We disagree and believe these statements contradict Defense Secretary Lloyd Austin's stated goal to strengthen civilian oversight at the Pentagon.¹⁰

Instead of strengthening the arms control architecture to reduce nuclear threats, President Trump actively worked to tear it apart. We applaud you for charting a new course, first, by extending New START with Russia a full five-years — breathing new life into a treaty that caps the strategic forces of the world's largest nuclear weapons powers. While you consider the shape of a successor agreement to New START, one that should aim to place limits on new types of weapons, we urge you to take the following steps to re-establish U.S. global leadership, with the goal of solving two of the most difficult proliferation challenges we face:

1. **Pursue diplomatic steps, together with U.S. allies and partners, to restore constraints on Iran's nuclear program.** Before President Trump unilaterally pulled the United States out of the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA) with Iran, the agreement had verifiably closed off Iran's pathways to a nuclear weapon. We agree with Secretary of State Blinken, who stated that your Administration supports a return to the JCPOA, provided Iran also returns to all its commitments under the 2015 agreement. Secretary Blinken is exactly right that reentry can serve as a “platform . . . to build a longer and stronger agreement to also capture some of the other issues that need to be dealt with in regard to missiles, with regard to Iran's activities and destabilizing activities in the region.”¹¹
2. **Promptly seek talks with North Korea, in close cooperation with U.S. allies and partners, to reduce its nuclear-weapons threat and pursue the conditions for peace**

⁷ Sara Sirota, *Pentagon Estimates New ICBM System to Cost \$264 Billion Over Life Cycle*, Inside Defense (Oct. 7, 2020), <https://insidedefense.com/daily-news/pentagon-estimates-new-icbm-system-cost-264-billion-over-life-cycle>.

⁸ Admiral Charles Richard, *Forging 21st-Century Strategic Deterrence*, U.S. Naval Institute (Feb. 2021), <https://www.usni.org/magazines/proceedings/2021/february/forging-21st-century-strategic-deterrence>.

⁹ Abhijnan Rej, *ICBM Commander Makes Case for US Nuke Modernization*, The Diplomat (Feb. 13, 2021), <https://thediplomat.com/2021/02/icbm-commander-makes-case-for-us-nuke-modernization/>.


¹⁰ Connor O'Brien, *Lloyd Austin Pledges 'Competent Civilian Control' of the Military as Defense Secretary*, Politico (Jan. 19, 2021), <https://www.politico.com/news/2021/01/19/austin-pledges-competent-civilian-control-of-the-military-as-defense-secretary-460457>.


¹¹ *Full Committee Nominations Hearing for Antony J. Blinken*. Senate Foreign Relations Committee, 117th Cong. (statement of Antony J. Blinken).

on the Peninsula. Over the past four years, North Korea grew its weapons and ballistic missile programs, while President Trump’s high-stakes summit approach failed to yield meaningful progress towards “denuclearization.” U.S. diplomacy should aim to return North Korea to compliance with its obligations under the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty (NPT), while being clear-eyed that Pyongyang is unlikely to surrender its programs overnight. We hope that your Administration’s North Korea policy review concludes that a step-by-step process — which tailors sanctions relief to the scope of a North Korean commitment to freeze and unwind its nuclear and ballistic missile programs — is the wisest course of action.

As the only country to have ever used nuclear weapons in a conflict, the United States must play a leading role in ensuring that the most destructive weapon ever created is never used again. We stand ready to support your policies and diplomatic initiatives to help us reach what former Senator Sam Nunn called “The Mountaintop: A World Free of Nuclear Weapons.”¹²

Sincerely,


Edward J. Markey
United States Senator


Ro Khanna
Member of Congress

cc: The Honorable Secretary of State, Antony J. Blinken
The Honorable Secretary of Defense, Lloyd J. Austin III

¹² Sam Nunn, *The Mountaintop: A World Free of Nuclear Weapons, the Nuclear Threat Initiative*. (June 14, 2007), <https://www.nti.org/analysis/speeches/nunn-mountaintop-free-weapons/>