

FOREIGN AFFAIRS

Sleepwalking Toward the Nuclear Precipice

The World Needs a Wake-Up Call

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One of the best accounts of the lead-up to World War I, by the historian Christopher Clark, details how a group of European leaders led their nations into a conflict that none of them wanted. Gripped by nationalism and ensnared by competing interests, mutual mistrust, and unwieldy alliances, “the Sleepwalkers,” as Clark dubs them, made a series of tragic miscalculations that resulted in 40 million casualties.

Around the world today, leaders face similar risks of miscalculation—except heightened by the presence of nuclear weapons. The United States and Russia together possess more than 90 percent of the world’s atomic arsenal, but they share the stage with seven other nuclear powers, several of which are engaged in volatile rivalries. Whereas a century ago millions died over four years of trench warfare, now the same number could be killed in a matter of minutes.

President-elect Joseph Biden, Vice-President-elect Kamala Harris, and their incoming national security team must confront the sobering fact that the potential for nuclear weapons use shadows more of the world’s conflicts

than ever before. A single accident or blunder could lead to Armageddon. As a result, Biden will need to chart a new path on nuclear policy and arms control—one that creates new safeguards against accidental or ill-considered use of nuclear weapons and shores up international mechanisms that have long helped to keep the peace.

UNTHINKABLE, BUT NOT IMPOSSIBLE

The warning bells have been ringing for years. We wrote in *Foreign Affairs* more than a year ago (“[The Return of Doomsday](#),” September/October 2019) about the elements that have destabilized the previous equilibrium and increased nuclear risks: where national interests clash, countries are making less use of dialogue and diplomacy than they once did; and as arms control structures have eroded, advanced missile systems, new technologies, and cyberweapons have appeared on the scene. Now, the COVID-19

pandemic has exposed the fragility of the international mechanisms for managing transnational risks and underscored the need for new cooperative approaches to anticipate and deal with threats. One lesson of COVID-19 is that the unthinkable does happen. And with nuclear weapons, the consequences would be even more devastating.

To reduce the risk of nuclear accident or war, the Biden administration must reestablish nuclear dialogue with key nuclear states and other important powers. To be successful, however, it will have to build a working relationship with Congress, including with its Republican members, on issues that should be not just bipartisan but nonpartisan— such as arms control, nuclear policy, and diplomacy with other nuclear powers.

U.S.-Russian relations are in a dismal state, but Washington and Moscow must once again acknowledge that they share an existential interest in preventing the use of nuclear weapons. The Biden administration and congressional leaders must also acknowledge that fact and work together to reverse the erosion of arms control dialogue and structures that have for many decades made the world a safer place. Dealing with adversaries in the nuclear arena calls for diplomacy, not posturing. Both the Biden administration and Congress must create the political space for the United States and Russia to renew military-to-military, diplomat-to-diplomat, and scientist-to-scientist engagement.

Biden has spent decades fostering cooperation within Congress and between Congress and the executive branch. As soon as possible, he should

work with Democratic and Republican leaders to create a new bipartisan liaison group—comprising House and Senate leaders and committee chairs—focused on Russia policy, nuclear dangers, and NATO. Such a group would strengthen the president's negotiating hand with Russia by demonstrating bipartisan support for a new direction in U.S. nuclear policy and arms control—one that advances both U.S. and global security.

NUCLEAR RESTART

There is much Biden can do to signal an immediate shift in U.S. policy. He can begin to rebuild alliances and regional security structures that have atrophied under his predecessor. He can set out a national security strategy that reduces the role of nuclear weapons. And he can articulate these changes in a comprehensive speech on nuclear policy, which would send a powerful signal to allies and adversaries that the Biden administration is committed to restoring U.S. leadership on nuclear policy and arms control.

Equally important will be a series of executive actions that the new president can take in his earliest days in office. Chief among them will be to make good on his promise to extend the New Strategic Arms Reduction Treaty (New START) with Russia before it expires on February 5. This treaty is crucial to sustaining verification of and limits on strategic nuclear forces. Biden should extend it for five years—the maximum time period permitted. Doing so would engender broad support at home and among European and Pacific allies.

With this crucial building block in place, Biden should announce a reduction in deployed strategic nuclear weapons—from the 1,550 permitted under the treaty to, say, 1,400 by the end of 2021—and urge Russia to make a reciprocal commitment. Deeper reductions could be achieved but may require mutual understandings or agreements with Russia and possibly with other nuclear weapons states. Such negotiations should encompass new weapons delivery systems and potentially new domains—cyber, for instance—but they should not be so expansive in scope that they foreclose a path to a new agreement within the term of the New START extension.

Biden could also direct a review of the U.S. nuclear command, control, and warning system, including “fail-safe” steps to safeguard against cyberthreats and the unauthorized, inadvertent, or accidental use of a nuclear weapon. Such a review should consider options to increase warning and decision time for U.S. officials and, if possible, lay the groundwork for reciprocal changes in Russia. Both the U.S. and Russian presidents should welcome the possibility of longer decision times, given the extraordinary responsibility on their shoulders to avoid a nuclear blunder. The United States could also encourage other nuclear states to conduct their own internal fail-safe reviews as well. These could serve as a foundation for broader risk reduction measures that nuclear powers could adopt, whether bilaterally or at the regional level: for example, establishing cyber “rules of the road” that preclude cyberattacks on nuclear facilities, nuclear command-and-control structures, and early-warning systems.

Perhaps the most consequential change Biden could make would be to place guardrails around the president’s sole authority over the use of nuclear weapons. Since the end of the Cold War, military capabilities have evolved in ways that compound the already immense pressure a president would be under to decide, perhaps within minutes, whether to use nuclear weapons. To help ensure that any future decisions of this magnitude would be deliberative, based on appropriate consultations, and undertaken in a manner consistent with the Constitution and with U.S. and international law, Biden should sign a directive creating a new process for the use of nuclear weapons. The directive should stipulate that any decision to use nuclear force—either first use or self-defense when the decision-making timetable allows—should involve consultations with specified senior executive branch policy and legal officials as well as with the leaders of both parties in Congress. These new procedures could be reinforced through legislation. While drafting such a law, Congress could conduct a careful review of the severe erosion of its constitutional responsibility to declare war—and investigate how the War Powers Act has practically ceased to function and might be remedied.

A WAR THAT MUST NEVER BE FOUGHT

In the long term, the Biden administration will need to make a sustained diplomatic effort to revive the many processes, mechanisms, and agreements that allow nations to manage their relations in peacetime and thus to avoid nuclear conflict. That stabilizing architecture is impossible to maintain without

dialogue. The United States will specifically need to restart talks about crisis management with Russia and between NATO and Russia. It will also need to restart separate talks with China. In the absence of that dialogue—intended to avoid or resolve incidents that could escalate into conflict—Washington will find it much harder to reach a mutual understanding with Moscow and Beijing on nuclear risk reduction.

More broadly, the United States and Russia should revive the admonition, articulated by both President Ronald Reagan and Soviet General Secretary Mikhail Gorbachev, that “a nuclear war cannot be won and must never be fought.” Working with China, France, and the United Kingdom to make the same declaration would send a powerful signal that despite tensions in other policy areas, leaders recognize their responsibility to work together to prevent nuclear catastrophe. It would also help build momentum for additional nuclear nonproliferation and disarmament steps—which in turn would strengthen the commitment of countries without nuclear weapons to forgo developing them.

A common declaration of this sort could serve as a foundation for subsequent cooperation between nuclear powers. This could include securing nuclear materials, establishing a moratorium on Russian and U.S. intermediate-range land-based missiles west of the Urals, reducing U.S. and Russian forward-based nonstrategic weapons, and easing the escalating competition between offensive nuclear forces and missile defenses in Europe and Asia.

The lesson of World War I is that mutual misunderstandings can lead

even reluctant leaders into conflict. World leaders are once again sleepwalking toward the precipice—this time of a nuclear catastrophe. They must wake up before it is too late.

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