

Nuclear Proliferation Challenges Facing the Biden Administration

Eric Brewer

The Biden administration faces a strained global nonproliferation regime. Iran's nuclear program is moving forward with few constraints. North Korea continues to expand its nuclear weapons arsenal, posing an increasing threat to the region and the United States. Other nuclear challenges—such as Saudi Arabia's nuclear ambitions and foot-dragging on transparency measures—highlight the potential for a more complex future nuclear proliferation landscape that tests the effectiveness of the traditional U.S. policy toolkit.

The Biden administration will need to effectively manage near-term nuclear proliferation risks while also planning and investing in U.S. strategies and capabilities to ward off over-the-horizon threats.

Q1: What is the most urgent issue facing the new administration when it comes to nuclear proliferation?

A1: The Biden administration will need to decide fairly quickly how it wants to try and rein in Iran's nuclear program, and whether that means seeking a return to the Iran nuclear deal from which the Trump administration withdrew in mid-2018. Over the past several years, Tehran has [gradually expanded](#) its nuclear activities in response to the U.S. withdrawal and has taken a series of aggressive [steps](#) in recent months to try and gain negotiating leverage over the new Biden administration.

As a result, Iran's breakout timeline—the amount of time it needs to produce enough fissile material for a weapon following its decision to do so—is now only [a few months](#) and will likely decrease further as Iran expands its program. Iran has also gained more experience [operating its advanced centrifuges](#), recently [announced plans](#) to eventually begin production of uranium metal (a process relevant to producing the core of a nuclear weapon) and, in late February 2021, is slated to reduce the access provided to international inspectors in order to comply with a new [Iranian law](#). These developments have set the stage for a crisis in the early days of the Biden administration.

President Biden and his advisors have indicated that the United States will return to compliance with the deal—[if Iran does the same](#)—and then work to build on the deal to address other issues of concern, such as Iran's missile program. However, Iranian officials—likely trying to strengthen their negotiating hand—have stated that the United States will need to [provide sanctions relief before they will be willing to return](#) to compliance.

In a best-case scenario, Iran's statements are mostly political posturing, and the United States and Iran will be able to develop solutions to both the technical and political problems to allow a mutual return to the deal. However, if Iran sticks to more hardline interpretations of its demands, hopes for a mutual return could grind to a halt. Tehran would then have to decide whether to follow through on plans to increase its nuclear activities—and risk further escalation—

or back down. Both sides would have to grope to find a “Plan B”—such as an interim deal that requires Iran to freeze its nuclear expansion in return for some sanctions relief.

Q2: Looking beyond its first months in office, what will be the most complicated nuclear challenge for the new administration? What is the “trickiest” problem to solve?

A2: Trying to put the brakes on North Korea’s expanding nuclear arsenal will probably be the most complex nuclear challenge faced by the Biden administration. North Korea is no longer a minor nuclear nuisance. Over the past four years—and despite the unprecedented summits between President Trump and Chairman Kim Jong-un—North Korea’s nuclear and missile capabilities have grown qualitatively and quantitatively. Today, Pyongyang likely possesses [dozens](#) of nuclear weapons (including some thermonuclear weapons), intercontinental ballistic missiles (ICBMs) [capable of reaching the United States](#), and a growing array of [solid-fuel systems](#) (which can be launched faster and with less warning). North Korea is also developing a [submarine-launched ballistic missile](#) (SLBM) as well as [multiple re-entry vehicles](#) and other technologies to defeat U.S. missile defenses. Recently, North Korea declared it would strive to develop [tactical nuclear weapons](#) (typically weapons with smaller yields and shorter ranges that could be used against military targets on the battlefield).

These developments raise concerns about the credibility of U.S. extended deterrence commitments to South Korea and Japan (i.e., whether the risks of a nuclear strike on a U.S. city would deter the United States from coming to the aid of its allies during a conflict), and how North Korean command and control will evolve as these systems are fielded and the risks of early nuclear use. They also raise questions about Kim’s intentions and motives: How might Kim use—or think he can use—these capabilities for coercive leverage during a crisis or conflict?

Every U.S. administration has so far tried and failed to convince North Korean leaders to give up their nuclear weapons. Today, the prospects of denuclearization are nearly zero, leading some in Washington to advocate for an arms control approach that [seeks more limited aims](#). But there remains little agreement over what this approach means in practice. Options range from [capping](#) elements of North Korea’s nuclear or missile program in exchange for sanctions relief to [reducing the risk of escalation](#) and nuclear war between the United States and North Korea through confidence-building measures and changes to U.S. military policy and posture. Having a clear understanding of those options, the policy choices they entail, their risks and benefits, their relationship to one another, and the tradeoffs among them will be crucial for the incoming Biden administration as it forms its policy on North Korea.

Q3: What problems may not be on the administration’s radar when it comes to proliferation threats?

A3: President Biden and his team should also look beyond the immediate horizon when it comes to proliferation risks. Indeed, there are [reasons to worry](#) about proliferation or hedging by traditional U.S. allies, and also by countries that don’t fit neatly into a definition of ally or adversary. [Saudi Arabia](#) and [Turkey](#)—whose leaders have expressed interest in nuclear weapons and have troubled relationships with Washington, their nominal security guarantor—are two examples. South Korea—where [open discussion of nuclear options](#) has become more prominent—also wants to keep the door open on developing reprocessing capabilities. Saudi Arabia has [openly declared](#) its desire to pursue enrichment while also shunning calls for it to adopt the Additional Protocol, which would provide much-needed transparency over its program. Efforts by [Saudi Arabia](#), [Turkey](#), [South Korea](#), and [Japan](#) to quietly improve their

domestic missile and space launch capabilities—allowing them to make progress on potential nuclear delivery options and with uncertain effects on regional stability—are another development to keep an eye on.

Managing proliferation risks for these countries will be different—and in some ways, more difficult—than confronting proliferation threats from the so-called “rogue states” of the past 30 years. In addition, shifts in the geopolitical environment—from diminished U.S. influence to competition with China—will make it harder for the United States to use traditional strategies to combat proliferation.

Q4: What should the administration do?

A4: *On Iran, the United States [should pursue a clean return](#) to the Iran nuclear deal as its option of first resort. Doing so would provide the best opportunity to limit Iran’s program now and to buy time to build on the deal. An attempt at a clean return may not succeed, but it will put the United States in a better position to pivot to other options.*

Develop a North Korea strategy that prioritizes reducing the threat posed by North Korea’s nuclear and missile program rather than eliminating it entirely. The administration’s policy review should carefully examine the range of arms control options available to the United States, their impact on denuclearization and other policies (e.g., nonproliferation, China), develop a strategic rationale for what the United States should prioritize and why, and identify what would constitute a “bad” arms control outcome.

Re-look the U.S. nonproliferation and counterproliferation toolkit and update it to current and future proliferation challenges. The Biden administration should game out potential future proliferation scenarios beyond Iran and North Korea to uncover shortcomings in U.S. policy responses and identify fixes or alternatives. [History shows](#) that stopping allied or partner proliferation can be a tough diplomatic slog and will require the United States to put serious consequences on the table. Therefore, assumptions and planning in this effort need to be realistic, not optimistic. In doing so, they need to go beyond the “first move” and prepare for a scenario in which Washington’s “Plan A” fails.

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