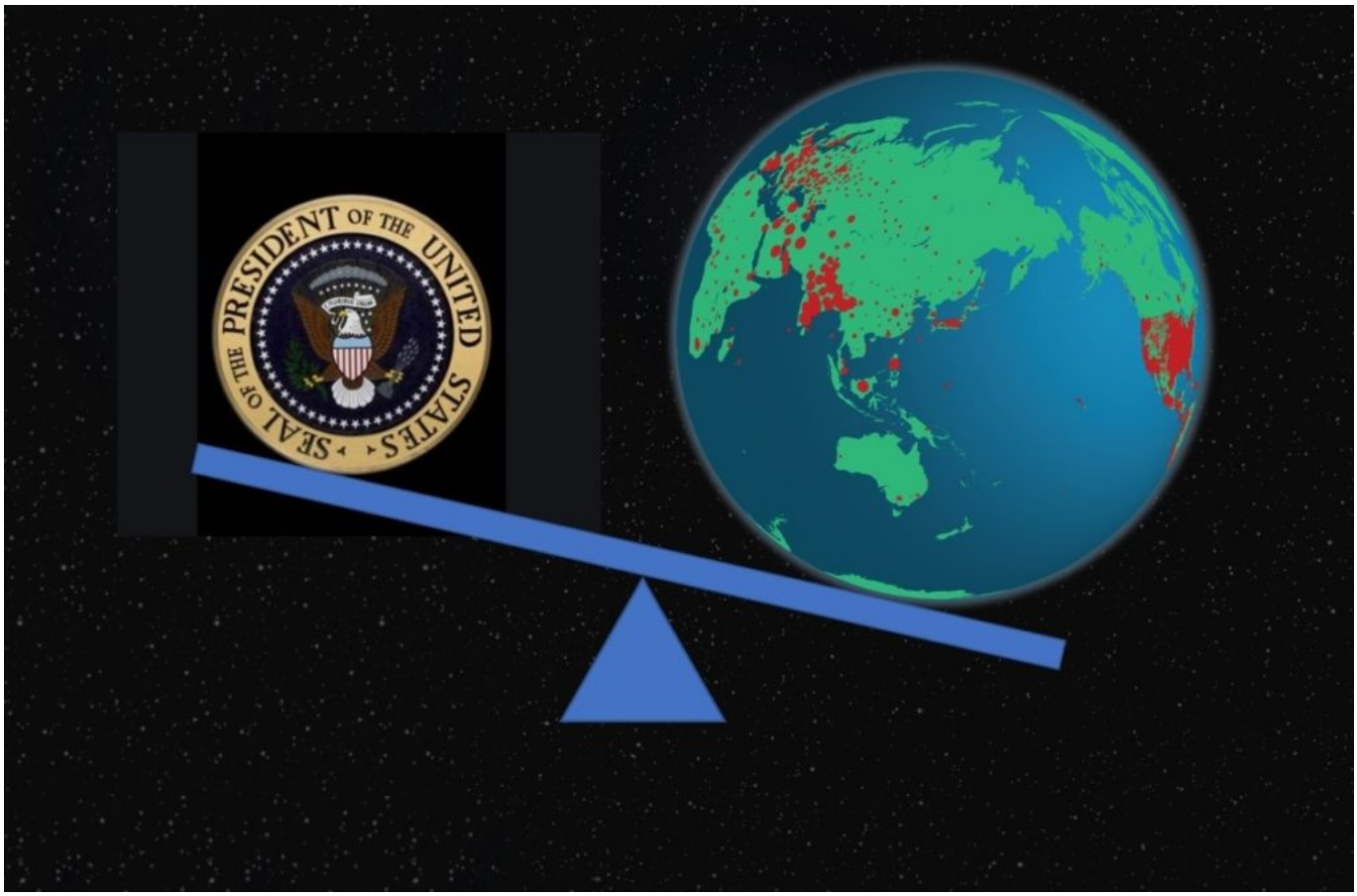
THE U.S. ELECTION AND NUCLEAR ORDER IN THE POST-PANDEMIC WORLD



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LEON V. SIGAL

SEPTEMBER 29 2020

I. INTRODUCTION

In this essay, Leon Sigal concludes that "Absent popular action…positive change to the global nuclear order will continue to be marginal and fitful. This makes the international milieu critical for the nuclear future – a milieu that a president can influence but not determine."

The essay may be downloaded in PDF format **here**.

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Banner image: Nautilus Institute incorporating graphic of pandemic-Earth by Sophia Mauro

II. NAPSNET SPECIAL REPORT BY LEON V. SIGAL

THE U.S. ELECTION AND NUCLEAR ORDER IN THE POST-PANDEMIC WORLD

SEPTEMBER 29 2020

Abstract

U.S. power and prestige may have diminished in recent years, but the United States still plays a pivotal role in international institutions, alliances, and mass media, so who becomes its president and which party controls Congress matter a lot for the global nuclear order. However unlikely it is that Donald Trump's expressed desire to contest the election's outcome could succeed, whether the nation can avert a violent backlash among disappointed partisans is less clear.

Nuclear weapons are often thought to be the esoteric domain of experts. Yet one need only recall that although mass activism does not guarantee policy change, three of the most significant developments in recent decades – the ban on above-ground nuclear tests, the INF Treaty, and the collapse of the Berlin Wall – would not have happened without mass protests in many countries. And citizen involvement, organized by NGOs, can even facilitate monitoring of arms agreements and nuclear developments in some countries.

The public's understandable preoccupation with COVID-19, economic distress, racial animus, and climate change leave scant scope for paying heed to nuclear risks, which makes mobilization of a mass anti-nuclear movement unlikely. Absent popular action, however, positive change to the global nuclear order will continue to be marginal and fitful. This makes the international milieu critical for the nuclear future – a milieu that a president can influence but not determine.

President Trump's reelection is likely to have a pernicious effect on that milieu, hindering international cooperation to limit nuclear weapons and accelerating a qualitative arms race that could endanger crisis stability. Yet two of Trump's more positive impulses are likely to continue. He is unlikely to increase the risk of an intense crisis leading to nuclear war because he wants to avoid U.S. involvement in any wars, not start new ones. He will also try to sustain negotiations with North Korea to curb nuclear developments there, though whether he is prepared to satisfy Pyongyang's stiffer demands remains in doubt.

His opponent, Joseph Biden, will face those same demands. Personnel is policy, and the Biden administration will likely be staffed with officials who served under President Obama. That means a return to shoring up alliances and international cooperation. It also means continuity with Obama's nuclear policies. Whether he will curtail Obama's modernization plans is not clear, but in contrast to Trump, he will try his best to restore the JCPOA, which could head off nuclear weapons development not only in Iran but also in Saudi Arabia. He will also strive to save START, seek technical talks with China, and not abandon the Open Skies accord.

Background

The hopes and fears of many at home and abroad are riveted on the November 3 presidential election in the United States – and understandably so. However much its power and prestige may have diminished in recent years, the United States still plays a pivotal role in international institutions, alliances, and mass media, so who becomes its president matters a lot for the global nuclear order.

Almost as important as the outcome of the presidential race is whether the next president's party can secure a commanding majority in both houses of Congress.

However unlikely it is that Trump's expressed desire to contest the election's outcome could succeed, whether the nation can avert a violent backlash among disappointed partisans is less clear.

Yet focusing on the U.S. election risks drawing too much attention away from the deeper questions that the world now faces – questions that a U.S. president can address but cannot answer alone. Among those major post-COVID unknowns with an impact on nuclear arming and disarming are the following:

Will the experience of the global pandemic cause further disruption of the international order?

Will distrust of governments wane or continue to impede international cooperation to contain the global pandemic, mitigate climate change, facilitate international trade, and promote nuclear proliferation?

Will the contagion of nativism and ethno-nationalism exacerbate disintegrative global political and economic trends or will the need for cooperation and expertise to contain the coronavirus triumph over the attempts of leaders to blame foreigners or immigrants for the spread of the pandemic?

Will inward-looking "America first" sentiment in the U.S. public and Congress recede or will it persist and further impair alliance relations and international cooperation on matters of global concern?

Will political and economic competition between the United States and China be held in check by modest efforts at cooperation or escalate into a new Cold War, and even military confrontation?

Will German deficit-financing stimulate EU economic recovery and ease disintegrative trends in

Europe or will the ethno-nationalist tide continue to rise on the continent?

Will New START be renewed and U.S.-China talks explore cooperative measures to reduce nuclear arms and nuclear risks or will intensified competition set off a new arms race?

In all these unknowns, the role of publics, and explicitly popular attitudes and activity, is potentially decisive. If that is not obvious in the case of nuclear weapons, which is often thought to be the esoteric domain of experts, one need only recall that while mass activism does not guarantee policy change, three of the most significant developments in recent decades – the ban on above-ground nuclear tests, the INF Treaty, and the collapse of the Berlin Wall – would not have happened without mass protests in many countries. And citizen involvement, organized by NGOs, can even facilitate monitoring of arms agreements and nuclear developments in some countries.

Yet the public's understandable preoccupation with COVID-19, economic distress, racial animus, and climate change leave scant scope for paying heed to nuclear risks, which makes mobilization of a mass anti-nuclear movement unlikely. Absent popular action, however, positive change to the global nuclear order will continue to be marginal and fitful.

The outcome of the U.S. presidential election will help shape answers to the post-COVID questions and especially the risk of nuclear war and the likelihood that negotiations to reduce and constrain the role of nuclear arms will resume.

A New Arms Race?

The United States, Russia, and China are all making new nuclear weapons. U.S. efforts began under the Obama administration, but when President Trump was shown a graph tracing START reductions in U.S. and Russian arms, he demanded that even more be built – only to be told that existing production lines were already full. After throwing a tantrum, he had to content himself with authorizing a new lower-yield warhead instead. Despite fears of a new arms race, the U.S. buildup thus remains constrained by existing production capacity, Russia may lack the financial wherewithal to replace its aged weapons at a much more rapid pace, and China is mainly expanding its SLBM and road mobile arsenal, which arguably enhances strategic stability though not necessarily crisis stability.

Although the number of arms being produced is not necessarily destabilizing, several qualitative developments are more worrisome. Increased accuracies will continue to jeopardize land-based missiles and intelligence down-links. More recently, purported Russian plans to "escalate in order to deescalate"[i] and to produce lower-yield warheads prompted the Trump administration to build theater-based intermediate-range missiles that ostensibly will be conventionally-armed and to deploy lower-yields warheads of its own on Trident submarines.

These moves are based on two fundamentally flawed assumptions: that deterrence will never fail and that a nuclear war, if fought, can be limited. The ability of political leaders to control the use of nuclear weapons in an intense crisis or during a war, always suspect, has become all the more precarious with the increasing potential for cyberattacks[ii] and anti-satellite weapons[iii] to disrupt command, control, communication, and intelligence. New hypersonic weapons under development in Russia, China, and the United States could aggravate crisis instability by drastically reducing how long it takes to reach their targets – the flash-to-bang time.[iv] Distinguishing conventionally-armed from nuclear-armed hypersonic missiles or lower- from higher-yield warheads in the heat of the moment could also prove difficult.

More worrisome are growing U.S.-China, U.S.-Russia, and Sino-Indian tensions, which, if they were

to intensify, may spark fears of impending war that raise the risk of crisis instability. A nuclear arms race and potential nuclear proliferation in Northeast Asia and the Persian Gulf could accentuate this danger. So too could displays of force by one rival or another – "dynamic force employment" is the Pentagon's buzzword for its displays – in the South China Sea, near Taiwan and the Senkaku/Diaoyu Islands, in the Baltic Sea and the Sea of Okhotsk, and on the Himalayas, which could spark deadly clashes. A case in point is Korea where large-scale joint U.S.-South Korean exercises compel North Korean counter-mobilization that could trigger a deadly clash that gets out of hand.

If Trump Wins

Observers of foreign policy have many reasons to prefer Donald Trump's defeat – to cite just a few, his abandonment of critically important international agreements like the JCPOA, the INF Treaty, and the Open Skies Treaty; his open promotion of nuclear arming by other nations; his undermining of international institutions like the WHO and the WTO; his open support for ethno-nationalists who undermine the democratic governments of European allies; his attempt to turn what is essentially a political and economic competition with China into a military and ideological confrontation; and his misguided mercantilist challenge to trade ties with allies like the TPP and global supply chains without obvious benefit to American workers. Such efforts are likely to persist in a second Trump administration.

Of even greater concern is the character of President Trump – mercurial and impulsive, uninformed yet impatient with the details of policy briefings, insecure enough to feed on flattery. As disrupter-i--chief, he prefers to govern by free-for-all instead of a coherent policy process and to promulgate policy tweets, often without follow-up.

Hopes for nuclear diplomacy with Iran, Russia, or China under Trump are much dimmer, darkening prospects of nuclear proliferation in the Persian Gulf and East Asia.

Yet two of Trump's more positive impulses are likely to continue. Despite his spasms of rhetorical excess, he is unlikely to increase the risk of an intense crisis leading to nuclear war because he wants to avoid U.S. involvement in any wars, not start new ones, and he will try to continue negotiations with North Korea to curb nuclear developments there.

Beyond drawing attention to himself by meeting with Kim Jong Un, he may not have fully understood what he was doing or paid much attention to the details of policy or implementation, but his administration had officials like the secretaries of State and Defense and a Joint Chiefs of Staff who did and he sometimes heeded their counsel.

Trump Administration officials claim credit for compelling the North to the negotiating table by threatening war. The evidence strongly suggests otherwise.[v] North Korean diplomats were well-aware of Trump's oft-expressed interest in negotiating during his 2016 presidential campaign. Although the February 2017 visit of a senior DPRK delegation was postponed, talks opened in the New York channel that spring. Washington gradually deployed more airpower and other forces to the region, but Defense Secretary Jim Mattis, Joint Chiefs of Staff Chairman Joseph Dunford, and the commander of U.S. Forces in Korea Vincent Brookes repeatedly voiced caution about using them and were reluctant to come up with military options for Korea sought by National Security Adviser H.R. McMaster. The drumbeat of war in the news media, amplifying hyperbolic threats by Trump of "fire and fury" and loose talk by others of "bloody nose" strikes, aroused consternation in Seoul, though not in Pyongyang. Careful parsing of Trump's over-the-top rhetoric suggests he was making deterrent threats in the event that North Korean actions put U.S. or allied security in jeopardy.[vi] On April 29, 2017, at the peak of the war fever, KCNA dismissed these threats as bluffs:

The U.S. is bluffing after firing dozens of missiles at Syria and dropping a GBU-43 bomb on Afghanistan. During his recent junket to Asia, U.S. Vice-President Pence, saying the world witnessed the "bold decision of the president" through the military actions in Syria and Afghanistan, behaved so arrogant as to urge the DPRK not to misjudge the will of the U.S. and test the decision of Trump and muscle of the U.S. forces. Dignitaries including the U.S. ambassador to the United Nations also noisily talk about "strong warning" to someone every day, asserting that the era of "strategic patience" has come to an end and all options including military action are on the table. **This is just a bluff of the U.S.** keen on flexing its muscle by striking non-nuclear countries and weak nations only. Such an act can never irritate the DPRK. ... The U.S. is getting evermore desperate in its bluffing, but it only reveals the vulnerability of those exasperated by the DPRK's nukes of justice and invincible military muscle.[vii]

Even as Trump has repeatedly expressed his desire for another summit meeting with Kim Jong Un, Pyongyang has erected a high hurdle for resuming talks. It is demanding unilateral steps up front to demonstrate a U.S. commitment to end enmity, demands that Washington has yet to satisfy. Three such steps might bring the North back to the negotiating table. One is a public commitment in principle to work toward what Secretary of State Pompeo once called “a fundamentally different strategic relationship”[viii] from enmity to friendship, starting with an end-of-war declaration. A second is a commitment to scale back all joint field exercises with South Korea on land, in the air, or offshore for one year or longer if negotiations continue to make progress. A third is sanctions easing such as granting an exemption from U.N. Security

Council sanctions to permit the reopening of the Kaesong Industrial Zone or to allow

North Korean sales of coal and textiles. Whether Trump is prepared to satisfy the DPRK’s stepped-up demands remains unclear.

If Biden Wins

In government, personnel is policy, and the Biden administration will likely be staffed with officials who served under President Obama. That means a return to shoring up alliances and international cooperation. It also means continuity with Obama’s nuclear policies.

Biden’s most considered responses on nuclear matters came in the campaign’s answer to a survey of Democratic candidates conducted by *The New York Times* in early 2020. Asked about the use of force “to preempt an Iranian or North Korean missile or nuclear test,” the Biden response was non-committal:

Force must be used judiciously to protect a vital interest of the United States, only when the objective is clear and achievable, with the informed consent of the American people and, where required, the approval of Congress. The nuclear program of North Korea and the nuclear ambitions of Iran pose such a vital interest. I would do whatever necessary to prevent Iran from acquiring a nuclear weapon, taking no option off the table. I would also be prepared to use force in the event of an imminent long-range missile ***attack*** by either country.[ix]

Biden will try his best to restore the JCPOA, which could head off nuclear weapons development not only in Iran but also in Saudi Arabia. Although some may counsel him to demand broader agreement with Iran up front, he is more likely to embrace Obama’s underlying strategic premise, that the JCPOA signals U.S. desire to avoid siding with either Sunnis or Shiites and, if implemented, may facilitate further cooperation with Teheran. As Biden was quoted by *The New York Times*:

What Iran is doing is dangerous, but still reversible. If Iran moves back into compliance with its

nuclear obligations, a Biden administration would re-enter the JCPOA as a starting point to work alongside our allies in Europe and other world powers to extend the deal's nuclear constraints. Doing so would provide a critical down payment to re-establish U.S. credibility, signaling to the world that America's word and international commitments once again mean something. My administration would also leverage renewed international consensus around America's Iran policy – and a redoubled commitment to diplomacy – to more effectively push back against Tehran's other malign behavior in the region. This would include: targeted sanctions against Iranian support for terrorism and Iran's ballistic missile program; ironclad support for Israel; robust intelligence and security cooperation with regional partners; support for strengthening the capacity of countries like Iraq to resist Iranian influence; and a renewed commitment to diplomacy aimed at ending wars in Yemen and Syria that provide Iran with opportunities to expand.[x]

Biden's alliance management skills may be sorely tested in Asia, where South Korean preferences to avoid entanglement in a new Cold War with China and to deepen political and economic engagement with North Korea face resistance in Japan, tensions that Suga Yoshihide might ease as prime minister.

Curbing a renewed nuclear arms race to ease tensions in Asia through technical talks with China is likely to be a Biden objective. Mutual unease about China's missile buildup on the one hand and U.S. missile defenses and nuclear modernization plans on the other is likely to be the prime issue. That seemed evident in China's overbearing reaction to the U.S. deployment of the THAAD anti-missile system in South Korea. Beijing purportedly feared the capability of the AN/TPY-2 radar to cue U.S.-based tracking radars and distinguish decoys, although it was likely as moved by concern about the increased integration of U.S. alliances with South Korea and Japan that anti-missile defense requires. When deployment at a second site did not materialize, Beijing relented and resumed attempts to woo Seoul.

The Biden approach to North Korea reflects the views of his advisers who worked in the Obama administration:

The Trump administration's approach to North Korea has relied on pursuing photo ops with Kim Jong-un, reducing economic pressure, suspending military exercises and ignoring human rights. But America got very little in return. In fact, Pyongyang has continued to produce fuel for nuclear weapons, and improved its nuclear weapons and missile capabilities. After three years of Trump's approach, North Korea's weapons are now more powerful, more mobile, more accurate and more dangerous – and Kim is more defiant and emboldened. As Kim advances his ability to hit the United States – and anywhere else in the world, for that matter – we can't rely on Trump's tweets or threats to keep us safe.

I would work with our allies and partners to prevent North Korea's proliferation of nuclear weapons to bad actors; set the right formula of sanctions enforcement and sanctions relief; and make it harder for Kim to continue on his belligerent path, while making credible efforts to offer an alternative vision for a nonnuclear future to Kim and the people of North Korea. I would strengthen our core alliances with Japan and South Korea. And I would insist that China join us in pressuring Pyongyang – and that if it does not, the United States will continue to take measures to strengthen our ability to defend ourselves and our allies. I would be willing to meet with Kim – not to pursue a vanity project like Trump, but as part of an actual strategy that moves the ball forward on denuclearization.[xi]

If Biden makes no more serious effort to address the North's negotiating demands, instead of a resumption of nuclear diplomacy, Pyongyang is likely to end its self-imposed moratorium on long-range missile test-launches and nuclear tests and resume testing to develop a reentry vehicle for its

intercontinental-range rocket, a solid-fueled ICBM, and proven thermonuclear devices.

Saving START will be a challenge. Biden told *Foreign Affairs* he would not hold START hostage to nuclear talks with China but "pursue an extension of the New START Treaty, an anchor of strategic stability between the United States and Russia, and use that as a foundation for new arms control arrangements."[xii]

He will not abandon the Open Skies Treaty:

The Trump Administration says it is withdrawing from the Treaty because Russia is cheating. There are real concerns that Russia is not complying fully with the Treaty. It has improperly imposed restrictions on overflights over certain regions (Kaliningrad and the Russian-occupied regions of Abkhazia and South Ossetia in Georgia), to which the United States and other parties have objected. These Russian violations should be addressed not by withdrawing from the Treaty, but by seeking to resolve them through the Treaty's implementation and dispute mechanism. That is exactly how other disputes over Russian implementation have been resolved, including altitude restrictions over Chechnya.

Our allies have made clear they want us to remain in the Treaty, and to work together to address compliance issues with Russia. Without us, the Treaty could crumble. Withdrawal will exacerbate growing tensions between the West and Russia, and increase the risks of miscalculation and conflict.[xiii]

On nuclear arms, Biden has hinted at adopting a policy of no first use without quite committing to it: "As I said in 2017, I believe that the sole purpose of the U.S. nuclear arsenal should be deterring – and, if necessary, retaliating against – a nuclear attack."[xiv] Nor will he resume nuclear testing.

At the same time, Biden is likely to continue replacing the current nuclear force with new weapons, a modernization program initiated by the Obama administration, although Democrats in Congress may successfully press him to cut back excessive arms spending.

To change the dynamics of nuclear policy and rally public support, Biden may need to address the international political milieu more broadly. That requires going beyond a restoration of the pre-Trump ancient regime and confronting the inertia in the national security bureaucracy and the orthodoxy of a U.S. foreign policy establishment – what Obama aide Ben Rhodes has called "the Blob." – that seems determined to revive a muscle-bound version of American exceptionalism. As vice-president, Biden rose to the challenge in opposing the troop surge in Afghanistan and Iraq while supporting Obama's desire to avoid taking sides in the Saudi-Iran and Sunni-Shiite conflict. Yet, faced with overwhelming economic, racial, and viral crises at home, it remains to be seen whether Biden will be prepared to pursue principled and purposeful multilateral engagement abroad without reverting to throwing America's weight around.

III. ENDNOTES

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[iii]Katrina Hanson and Christian Shepherd, "U.S. Military Puts Space Weapons in Its Sights to Counter China, *Financial Times*, September 3, 2020, p. 4.

[iv]John T. Watts, Christian Trotti, and Mark J. Massa, Hypersonic Weapons in the Indo-Pacific Region (Washington: Scowcroft Center for Strategy and Security, August 2020).

[v]For a detailed history of U.S.-DPRK negotiations under Trump, Leon V. Sigal, "Paved with Good Intentions: Trump's Nuclear Diplomacy with North Korea, *Journal for Peace and Nuclear Disarmament*, 3, No. 1 (2020), pp. 163-82.

[vi]For example, "The United States has great strength and patience, but if it is forced to defend itself or its allies, we will have no choice but to totally destroy North Korea." White House Office of the Press Secretary, Remarks by President Trump to the 72nd Session of the U.N. General Assembly, September 19, 2017.

[vii]KCNA, "U.S. Muscle-Flexing Can Never Work on DPRK: KCNA Commentary," April 29, 2017. (Emphasis added.)

[viii]U.S., Department of State, Secretary of State Mike Pompeo, Interview with Yui Hideki of NHK, June 7, 2018.

[ix]Maggie Astor and David E. Sanger, "The 2020 Democrats on Foreign Policy," *New York Times*, February 6, 2020.

[x]Ibid.

[xi]Ibid.

[xii]Joseph R. Biden, Jr., "Why America Must Lead Again," *Foreign Affairs*, (March/April 2020).

[xiii] Statement by Vice President Joe Biden on President Trump's Decision to Withdraw from the Open Skies Treaty, May 22, 2020.

[xiv]Biden, "Why America Must Lead Again."

IV. NAUTILUS INVITES YOUR RESPONSE

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