



The costs of nuclear disarmament

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Nuclear disarmament advocates are having a tough year so far.

President Obama, who they thought would aggressively pursue nuclear reductions, is presenting a modernization plan for the three legs of the U.S. nuclear triad, nuclear bombers, sea-launched and land-based missiles.

Out-going Secretary of Defense Chuck Hagel, who endorsed the goal of nuclear disarmament before coming to the Pentagon, has since repeatedly [affirmed](#) U.S. nuclear modernization as the Department of Defense's "highest priority mission."

Russia's nuclear threats against NATO allies and China's development of a new ICBM with multiple warheads have undermined nuclear disarmers' assurances that further deep U.S. nuclear reductions would be prudent.

The final hope nuclear disarmers have is to convince the American people that the Obama administration's nuclear modernization plans are "[unaffordable](#) and [unsustainable](#)." Sen. Ed Markey (D-Mass.) and Rep. Earl Blumenauer (D-Ore.) hold similar views as they recently proposed the Smarter Approach to Nuclear Expenditures (SANE) Act, which they believe would save \$100 billion over the next decade by cutting U.S. nuclear forces.

They support this claim by citing reports like the National Defense Panel which [estimated](#) the cost of modernization to be between \$600 billion and \$1 trillion over the next thirty years, averaging about \$20 - \$33 billion per year.

What nuclear disarmers fail to mention, however, is that spending on nuclear weapons in the defense budget has been essentially flat for the past two decades, its lowest point in over 50 years.

As the Pentagon's former top weapons procurement official, Secretary of Defense Ashton Carter knows well that nuclear weapons and their supporting systems cost about \$16 billion per year, or only [three percent](#) of the annual defense budget. Spending only three percent on the nuclear arsenal is historically [below average](#); and modernization plans would just bring expenses to their historical norm.

Nuclear disarmers claim that cutting the number of nuclear weapons and delivery systems will save the taxpayer a lot of money, but as Secretary Carter has [said](#), nuclear reductions are “not the answer to our budget problem. They’re just not that expensive.”

In fact, the policy of nuclear disarmament may end up costing the United States more in the long run than if it continues current modernization plans.

U.S. nuclear weapons play a very important and cost-effective role in the current strategic environment by [assuring](#) our NATO allies in the face of Russian aggression and permitting allies such as South Korea and Japan, who fear Chinese and North Korean threats, to remain non-nuclear.

Cutting the U.S. nuclear arsenal further would likely embolden Russia and China, damage relations with allies, and drive allies to examine obtaining nuclear weapons themselves. These are costly possibilities indeed.

Also, the nuclear delivery systems we are investing in retain enormous value as a hedge against an uncertain and unknowable future. Some of the systems the United States is developing will be expected to operate effectively into the 2080s, 65 years from now.

By claiming that the United States should make further deep and “irreversible” cuts in the U.S. nuclear arsenal, nuclear disarmers show they are willing to hamstring U.S. capabilities for decades on the assumption of a benign future they cannot possibly foresee accurately.

Threats against the United States change frequently both in scope and severity, and often unexpectedly. If the United States were to make further deep cuts, it could be ill-equipped at best when new threats emerge. Modifying existing nuclear systems to meet new threats would take a good deal of time and be enormously expensive.

If modifying existing systems proves unworkable, purchasing whole new systems rapidly as a supplement to meet a future threat would likely be infeasible or, again, extremely costly. As anyone in the defense acquisition business knows, timelines of major defense projects are often measured not in years, but in decades.

Unfortunately world events often unfold much faster than the defense community can anticipate or plan for.

As such, it is prudent for the United States to invest in nuclear capabilities that are [flexible and resilient](#) in a fluid threat environment. That is precisely what the administration is requesting.

This is where the greatest value of a modernized U.S. nuclear arsenal lies. It would adapt as necessary to shifting threats. And if built with an eye toward the future, U.S. nuclear forces may be able to integrate the new technology that will inevitably arrive in the next 65 years.

By continuing to invest in nuclear weapons and their delivery systems, the United States is demonstrating a clear understanding of the value they provide in both deterring enemies and assuring allies in an unpredictable, dangerous world.

In a time of restricted budgets and scarce resources, Congress should prioritize those programs that provide the greatest value in the defense of the United States against the most serious threats, now and in the future. A modernized U.S. nuclear arsenal meets those requirements and is worth the very small portion of the Defense budget required.

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