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# Why the ‘Nuclear Utopians’ Are Wrong

Unilaterally reducing or eliminating America’s nuclear arsenal will not make the world a safer place.



An unarmed Trident II D5 missile launches from USS Nevada. *PHOTO: GETTY IMAGES/STOCKTREK IMAGES*

By KEITH B. PAYNE, Wall Street Journal, March 15, 2015 6:17 p.m. ET  
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A debate over the future of the U.S. nuclear arsenal is at a pivotal moment. Last month the Obama administration proposed a budget that calls for modernization of the “nuclear triad” of missiles, submarines and bombers. This is crucial because since the end of the Cold War the U.S. nuclear arsenal has been cut by 80% and after decades of neglect each leg of the triad is aging.

Nevertheless, the Defense Department’s \$15.9 billion nuclear modernization budget for fiscal year 2016, up slightly from 2015, has met strong disapproval from analysts and others whom I

call nuclear utopians. This group insists that the U.S. should delay or skip modernization, make further deep reductions in the U.S. nuclear arsenal, or even eliminate it.

By contrast, nuclear realists believe that, given the belligerence of Russia and China and their buildup of nuclear forces, prudence now demands that the U.S. modernize and make no further reductions below those already scheduled in the 2010 New Start Treaty. The congressional defense-budget hearings now under way will have far-reaching implications for U.S. national security and international order.

Nuclear utopians tend to believe that international cooperation, not nuclear deterrence, has prevented nuclear war since World War II. As Rose Gottemoeller, U.S. undersecretary of state for arms control, claimed in a speech last month: “We have been spared that fate because we created an intricate and essential system of treaties, laws and agreements.” The U.S. can lead the world toward nuclear reductions, the utopian thinking goes, by showing that Washington no longer relies on nuclear weapons and seeks no new capabilities.

This U.S. example, says George Perkovich of the Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, will “induce parallel” behavior in others. But if the U.S. attributes continuing value to nuclear weapons by maintaining its arsenal, says Stephen Young of the Union of Concerned Scientists, “other countries will be more inclined to seek” them. In short, the U.S. cannot expect others to forgo nuclear weapons if it retains them.

Nuclear realists respond that the U.S. already has cut its tactical nuclear weapons from a few thousand in 1991 to a few hundred today, while deployed strategic nuclear weapons have been cut to roughly 1,600 accountable weapons from an estimated 9,000 in 1992, with more reductions planned under New Start. Robert Joseph, a former undersecretary of state for arms control, notes that these reductions “appear to have had no moderating effect on Russian, Chinese or North Korean nuclear programs. Neither have U.S. reductions led to any effective strengthening of international nonproliferation efforts.”

Realists point out that foreign leaders base their decisions about nuclear weaponry largely on their perceived strategic needs, not in response to U.S. disarmament. Thus a close review of

India by S. Paul Kapur, a professor at the Naval Postgraduate School, concluded that “Indian leaders do not seek to emulate U.S. nuclear behavior; they formulate policy based primarily on their assessment of the security threats facing India.”

The same self-interested calculation is true for those nuclear and aspiring nuclear states that are of security concern to the U.S. They seek nuclear weapons to coerce their neighbors, including U.S. allies, and to counter U.S. conventional forces to gain a free hand to press their regional military ambitions.

Moreover, many U.S. allies have given up the nuclear option because America protects them with a “nuclear umbrella.” Some allies, including the Japanese and South Koreans, have said that if the U.S. nuclear umbrella loses credibility, they may consider getting their own. Further U.S. reductions may thus inspire nuclear proliferation.

Nuclear utopians and realists also perceive international relations differently. Utopians see an orderly system that functions predictably and increasingly amicably. Based on this perception they make two confident predictions.

The first is that U.S. deterrence will work reliably even with a relatively small nuclear arsenal, or even nuclear zero. In 2010 the authors of an essay in *Foreign Affairs* predicted confidently that a U.S. capability to retaliate “against only ten cities” would be adequate to deter Russia.

A second prediction is that differences between the U.S. and Russia or China will be resolved without regard to nuclear threats or capabilities. The 2012 report by the Global Zero Commission claimed that, “The risk of nuclear confrontation between the United States and either Russia or China belongs to the past, not the future.”

Nuclear realists have no confidence in these predictions. Before the nuclear age, great powers periodically came into intense conflict, and deterrence relying on conventional forces failed to prevent catastrophic wars. Since 1945, however, a powerful U.S. nuclear arsenal appears to have had a decisive effect in deterring the outbreak of World War III and containing regional crises and conflicts. Further deep U.S. reductions now would likely increase the risks of war, possibly including nuclear war.

Today as for millennia, international relations are fluid, unpredictable and dangerous. Russia's shocking aggression in Europe is a cold reminder of this reality. In January prominent Russian journalist Alexander Golts warned, "The West has forgotten how it had used nuclear deterrence to coexist with the Soviet Union. Now it will have to open up that playbook once more."

Further erosion of the U.S. nuclear arsenal would take decades to reverse, create fear among key allies, and inspire foes to challenge an America that appears less able to deter conflicts, nuclear or otherwise, in the hard times ahead. These are the stakes in the current debate over nuclear modernization.

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