



A Bad Time to Cut U.S. Nuclear Capability

Short-term budget gains would be risky as dangers keep rising.

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It is budget season in Washington, and nuclear-disarmament doves have again morphed into budget hawks. The familiar pitch is also back: Reducing the U.S. nuclear arsenal will ease global tensions, enlighten world leaders and save scarce defense dollars.

These suggestions might seem reasonable if one assumes that the defense budget is being crushed by nuclear modernization programs and that effective deterrence can be maintained with much fewer nuclear weapons. Both assumptions are wrong—and threaten the future safety of the U.S. and its allies.

In 2001 budget analyst David Mosher [referred](#) to the search for savings in the nuclear budget as “the hunt for small potatoes.” The many fixed costs associated with maintaining U.S. nuclear systems—and a relatively small budgetary footprint to begin with—don’t offer sizable savings over the long term. U.S. nuclear forces currently make up about 2%-3% of [the U.S. defense budget](#). Even when the biggest bills for modernization come due in the late 2020s, like the replacement strategic submarine and bomber, the total estimated cost won’t reach 5% of the budget. Since the number of nuclear weapons in the national stockpile has fallen over 75% since 1991, there is little margin left to cut.

Yet analysts like Lawrence Korb and Adam Mount of [the Center for American Progress](#) have put forward plans that significantly reduce the U.S. nuclear arsenal while saving, they claim, \$120 billion over 30 years. Even if the U.S. can save that much, and if the average base defense budget is \$500 billion annually over the next 30 years, the potential savings amount to less than 1% of total outlays.

There are better ways to meet or exceed the \$4 billion in annual savings that nuclear-disarmament advocates propose. The Congressional Budget Office recently [reported](#) that the government could save between \$3.1 billion and \$5.7 billion annually by shifting some noncombat, military-support jobs to civilian employees. This can be done without harming current conventional or nuclear capabilities.

Nuclear reductions would also have serious strategic implications for U.S. adversaries, as well as NATO and Asian allies. Responding to Russian, Chinese and North Korean aggression

by [withdrawing](#) nuclear weapons from Europe or cutting replacement submarines (as Messrs. Korb and Mount call for) won't comfort U.S. partners or deter revanchist leaders like [Vladimir Putin](#).

Though the Cold War is over, the possibility of interstate warfare, including nuclear clashes, has endured. Russia's 2014 invasion of Ukraine and apparent willingness to employ nuclear weapons in a conventional-regional war presents the U.S. nuclear arsenal with an unprecedented challenge to deterrence stability.

As Robert Scher, assistant secretary of defense, recently told Congress: Flexible and resilient U.S. nuclear capabilities are critical when the U.S. "must not only avoid unintended escalation, but also deter deliberate nuclear escalation like that envisioned in Russia's current strategy."

If the heavily sanctioned Russian economy can sustain Mr. Putin's nuclear modernization plans, the U.S. can afford to modernize its arsenal as well. A lack of political will in Washington is the only obstacle to adequately funding weapons meant to deter a nuclear attack against the homeland and U.S. allies. And that is no small potato.

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