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Long Live the Long-Range Standoff Nuke

President Obama should think twice before unilaterally giving up leverage in nuclear-reduction talks.

Matthew R. Costlow, The Wall Street Journal, Aug. 25, 2016, <http://www.wsj.com/articles/long-live-the-long-range-standoff-nuke-1472167203>

As his presidency enters its final months, President Obama is considering sweeping changes to U.S. nuclear policy. One consequential choice is whether to cancel the Long-Range Standoff (LRSO) weapon, a nuclear air-launched cruise missile. The president should resist the temptation. Canceling the LRSO would weaken America's nuclear deterrent and give up future negotiating leverage, making the president's vision of a "nuclear free world" even less plausible.

Opponents of this next-generation missile, such as former Secretary of Defense William Perry and former Assistant Secretary of Defense Andy Weber, [contend](#) that cancellation "could lay the foundation for a global ban" on nuclear cruise missiles. This bold claim runs contrary to the lessons history has taught about unilateral nuclear reductions.

The U.S. tried this approach to reducing nuclear cruise missiles in 1991. The Presidential Nuclear Initiatives unilaterally withdrew nuclear cruise missiles from U.S. naval forces while "urging" the Soviets to mirror U.S. actions. President George H.W. Bush hoped that the U.S.-Soviet relationship could enter a new phase based on mutual trust. He [said](#) the U.S. expected "our bold initiatives to meet with equally bold steps on the Soviet side."

Soviet and later Russian leaders made pronouncements in response, but they have marked the end of progress. For two decades, and despite all the promises, Russia has been modernizing its nuclear cruise missiles. In December 2015, Russia deployed conventional variants of these missiles over Syria. President Vladimir Putin then [reminded](#) the world that the missiles could be fitted with "special nuclear warheads." The U.S. unilateral gambit failed.

The Kremlin has repeatedly rebuffed U.S. supplications for further nuclear arms control because Moscow has no incentive. With every new call in the U.S. to kill the LRSO program, Mr. Putin moves closer to reducing America's nuclear bargaining leverage—and to having a near-monopoly on nuclear cruise missiles. Who believes canceling the LRSO would lead Mr. Putin to become an international peacenik and renounce nuclear cruise missiles?

The LRSO missile is also necessary to maintain U.S. national security. In a rare display of unity, Pentagon and State Department officials agree the weapon is needed to replace the current rapidly aging cruise missile. If existing strategic threats do not diminish, or get worse, the U.S.

would retain an important weapon for deterring Russia and assuring NATO allies in Europe. If security improves, the U.S. retains a significant bargaining tool. LRSO opponents appear willing to give up that prospect in their unrequited search for Russian love and respect.

While previous presidents have reduced the role and number of nuclear weapons in U.S. defenses, each has also endorsed a strategy of hedging against unpredictable and worsening security threats. The era of increasing threats has arrived, and policy makers must adjust again. Killing the LRSO would be an unforced error in a world with little room for mistakes.

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