

## **Nuclear Modernization in Today's Environment?**

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The Obama administration's proposed nuclear modernization program is now before Congress. If measured by the ratio of pro and con articles in the national press, the public debate is running roughly 4:1 against US nuclear modernization.

This lopsided public debate reflects two competing narratives. The first, more popular narrative, judging by the prevalence of articles against modernization, follows the belief that the priority goals of US nuclear policy are to promote global non-proliferation by delegitimizing nuclear weapons and reducing numbers deeply.

The policy recommendations that typically follow this narrative include pursuing further deep nuclear reductions, rejecting any new US nuclear capabilities and terminating or truncating US nuclear modernization programs.

An alternative narrative places first priority on deterring enemies and assuring allies rather than on pursuing deep reductions and anti-nuclear posturing for global non-proliferation purposes. The recommendations that follow this narrative typically include modernizing US nuclear forces.

Washington tends to want fixed and easily met deterrence requirements and the 1990s post-Cold War threat environment seemed to promise a benign new world order with little demand for US nuclear capabilities. The Cold War was over; US-Russian relations were moving to partnership; terrorism was the only threat; US conventional forces would be unbeatable forever; nuclear deterrence and weapons were increasingly irrelevant; and history supposedly was moving toward nuclear "abolition." The main US nuclear policy question was not modernization, but which nuclear forces to reduce and how quickly.

An entire generation of Americans has grown up with this unrealistic view of the world. The current 4:1 ratio of articles against US modernization is unsurprising; it reflects this comforting and undemanding post-Cold War narrative

However, US nuclear modernization is now essential for several fundamental reasons. First, today's realities are virtually the opposite of the expected new world order. Both Russia and China see great value in nuclear weapons to support expansionist foreign policies and they show zero interest in reducing their nuclear arsenals. Russia has a dedicated policy of noncompliance with inconvenient agreements, and its nuclear force modernization programs are particularly robust.

Second, Russia's nuclear policy involves coercive nuclear threats in regional conflicts it has fomented. We saw this in its 2008 military operations against Georgia, its 2014 occupation of

Crimea and in Russia's ongoing direct military intervention in eastern Ukraine. As US Deputy Defense Secretary Bob Work said recently, Russia is "playing with fire."

No one knows how far Russia will push this expansionist strategy backed by nuclear coercion, but in late 2014, Russian President Vladimir Putin claimed that Russian troops could be in five NATO capitals in two days. Yet, public commentary against US nuclear modernization remains couched in the goals and language of the old Post-Cold War narrative. It is as if the 1990s never ended.

In contrast, the noted Russian journalist Alexander Golts recently observed, "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."

Indeed, the value of nuclear deterrence has not been superseded by anything. Just ask the Ukrainians, many of whom regret giving up nuclear deterrence in return for the now-worthless Russian guarantees in the 1994 Budapest Memorandum.

Third, effective deterrence is about perceptions of US resolve at any level of escalation. We cannot set some low, easily met, fixed nuclear force standard and say "job done" because deterrence requirements change with the threat. Correspondingly, a US policy goal should be to have credible US deterrent options that can deny opponents any anticipation of advantage at any plausible level of escalation. That goal suggests the great value of flexible and resilient US nuclear capabilities.

Yet, after 25 years of US nuclear slumber and 80 percent reductions, the unavoidable reality is that without nuclear modernization, the US will lose those potentially important capabilities to support deterrence and assurance. As the vice chair of the JCS, Adm. James Winnefeld, said in recent testimony, "The choice right now is modernizing or losing deterrent capability." He added, "That's the stark choice we're faced with." Precisely right.

Fortunately, the Obama administration's nuclear modernization programs appear to fully recognize these realities and will help sustain the necessary flexibility and resilience of US capabilities.

The relevant question now, however, is how to protect those programs against heavy political criticism? Part of the answer is for those who care to explain clearly, simply and publicly that the comforting old post-Cold War narrative and corresponding anti-nuclear agenda do not fit contemporary realities. Putin's crude nuclear heavy-handedness helps make the case for US modernization, but lingering US belief in a benign new world order is too attractive to give up easily.

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