

Opinion – The US Doesn't Need More Nuclear Weapons

Written by Sveta Yefimenko

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SVETA YEFIMENKO, OCT 10 2023

For the first time since the conclusion of the Cold War, the US has embarked on a concerted and long-overdue effort to modernize its strategic and tactical nuclear arsenal. The 2022 Nuclear Posture Review identified modernization or replacement of nuclear weapons and all three legs of the nuclear triad—strategic bombers, ballistic missile submarines, and underground silos housing intercontinental ballistic missiles—as a top priority. The US Department of Defense released a fact sheet which noted that most nuclear systems in the US are currently “operating beyond their original design life, risking system effectiveness, reliability, and availability.” Updating nuclear warheads and delivery systems is a time-consuming and expensive process that’s projected to take the next two decades and hundreds of billions of dollars to complete.

The modernization program was delayed for decades as Washington dedicated military resources to the Global War on Terror. America’s nuclear program was conceived and designed in a geopolitical landscape that differed dramatically from today’s; terrorism, cyberattacks, and nuclear-capable adversaries like Russia and China contour the current threat environment. This is in striking contrast to the optimism immediately following the Cold War, when there was hope of normalizing relations with Moscow and China’s “peaceful rise” was seen as a positive development. The push toward modernization comes in the context of Russia’s invasion of Ukraine and increased competition with China as both nuclear peers aggressively modernize their own arsenals. For example, Russia recently claimed to have tested the Burevestnik, a low-flying cruise missile that can carry a nuclear warhead and is also nuclear powered (which means that it can remain airborne for days) while China’s rapid nuclear build-up includes fast breeder reactors, new nuclear silos, and more sophisticated nuclear submarines.

As the relationship between Beijing and Moscow grows closer, so does the threat of nuclear conflict. The rising tension has led some analysts to call for the US to go beyond mere modernization by significantly expanding its stockpile of nuclear missiles. Robert Peters at The Heritage Foundation, a conservative think tank, writes that we have entered a new nuclear age in which the US is tasked with deterring both Russia and China, as well as an aggressive North Korea. Given the higher stakes, Peters argues, the US needs not only more but more varied nuclear weapons to match the adversaries’ nuclear forces. Peters concludes: “After more than three decades of shrinking nuclear arsenals due to arms control measures, it might finally be time for the United States to consider expanding the size of its strategic arsenal given Russian and Chinese actions.” Matthew Costlow advanced a similar position in the Wall Street Journal. Costlow posits that, since post Cold War enemy nuclear arsenals have undergone rapid modernization and the Pentagon estimates that China’s arsenal will quadruple by 2030, the US needs “nuclear expansion” to maintain effective deterrent capability.

Expanding the US nuclear arsenal is misguided for three reasons. First, the US already has assured destruction capability. Second, a nuclear buildup courts geopolitical conflict that can lead to nuclear crisis. Finally, the world has nuclear weapons to spare. Let’s examine each of these reasons in detail.

Firstly, the US already possesses assured destruction capability. Historically, Washington’s nuclear policy has prioritized deterrence based on assured destruction, with most defence experts agreeing that the approach has been a resounding success since no country has attacked the US with nuclear weapons. Even in the event of a massive

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nuclear strike on American nuclear targets by a nuclear peer like Russia or China, the US would have sufficient weapons left for a retaliatory strike that can effectively wipe out both the adversary's military infrastructure and economic base. Indeed, a nuclear retaliatory strike is guaranteed to hit cities and kill millions of civilians even if it were intended to strike solely military targets. Since the American nuclear arsenal was designed to withstand a worst-case scenario (such as absorbing a massive nuclear attack and then retaliating with devastating destruction), the nation would have sufficient nuclear power to conduct effective counterforce strikes even if a competitor's arsenal is numerically larger. America doesn't need parity for effective deterrence; it just needs enough weapons for assured destruction. Put simply, the more we don't use nuclear weapons, the better they work.

Secondly, a nuclear build-up courts geopolitical conflict that can lead to nuclear crisis. Is expanding the nuclear stockpile a provocation or a rational reaction to enemy threats? Well, it's complicated. If the US expands its nuclear arsenal, Russia and China are likely to respond in kind in order to keep pace, skyrocketing global tensions, further straining relations, and risking a crisis that can swiftly turn nuclear. The looming nuclear danger already dwarfs the height of the Cold War. China, which has never been party to a nuclear-arms agreement, is on track to become a nuclear peer with the US by 2035 and the New Strategic Arms Reduction Treaty (START) with Russia—which limits each nation to 1,550 warheads—is set to expire in 2026. Given Washington's modernization aims, Beijing and Moscow are both determined to ensure that their nuclear forces can penetrate US missile defences. If New START expires without a follow-up treaty, both Russia and the US may upload hundreds of additional warheads onto their launchers. Negotiations for a successor treaty broke down following Russia's invasion of Ukraine, and it's likely that political tension will continue to impede further dialogue. Yet as Charles L. Glaser, James M. Acton, and Steve Fetter have recently argued in *Foreign Affairs*, increasing nuclear threat capabilities is likely to add more fuel to the three-way arms race with Russia and China, which means that the US may have to fight both superpowers simultaneously. For more than 50 years, China presented Washington with a distinct but separate foreign policy challenge from, first, the Soviet Union and now, Russia. As the two nations grow closer, united in part by what they regard as American global "hegemony", a deepening of hostilities can lead to aggression that risks nuclear war.

Lastly, the world has nuclear arms to spare. Following years of Trump-era secrecy, the Biden administration's declassification of stockpile numbers reveals that America's current nuclear arsenal clocks in at 1,670 deployed strategic warheads, with thousands more languishing in reserve or retirement. For comparison, Russia has 1,674 actively deployed warheads and China has 410 reserve warheads. However, the actual number of nuclear weapons necessary to inflict civilization-ending destruction is a modest 100. Any more than that, and we're in for nuclear winter on an uninhabitable planet, to say nothing of diminishing returns. Consider this: a global nuclear exchange could kill 500 to 600 million people in minutes. Even Henry Kissinger, that great paragon of world peace, had mused, "What is the sense in developing a weapon that can destroy a city twice over?" While some defence experts have countered this logic by pointing out that many of America's land-based missiles are scattered across sparsely populated regions to draw fire from opponents, thereby exhausting the adversary's supply of atomic ammunition, it's worth pointing out that this strategy would kill millions of people and make America's hinterland uninhabitable for many generations.

To summarize, while modernizing the US nuclear arsenal is a long-overdue necessity, expanding it would be a mistake. Adding more nuclear weapons to America's stockpile is a costly and unnecessary endeavour that would make the world less safe by increasing the chances of nuclear catastrophe. Even with a complete overhaul of America's nuclear program, enough of the Russian and Chinese arsenals would survive a first strike to utterly topple America's economy and society in retaliation, leaving radioactive ruins where New York, Chicago, and San Francisco once stood.

About the author:

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