

ISSUE BRIEF

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Obama's Wish to Cut Nuclear Arsenal Undermines National Security

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On Wednesday in Berlin, President Obama called for negotiated cuts in deployed nuclear weapons with the Russian Federation, as much as one-third below the New Strategic Arms Reductions Treaty (New START) level of 1,550. He also stated that he would focus on U.S. and Russian tactical nuclear weapons in Europe and reinvigorate the Administration's efforts on the Comprehensive Test Ban Treaty (CTBT) and the Fissile Material Cutoff Treaty.

The Administration's announcement is imprudent because the U.S. gave up much of its leverage during New START negotiations. The President's proposed initiatives will further undermine U.S. national security.

Reduce Now, Ask Questions Later. The Administration's announced initiatives are potentially dangerous in the following ways:

- **New START's degraded verification regime makes it more difficult to assess Russia's nuclear weapons capabilities.** After the treaty was ratified, Moscow launched the most extensive nuclear weapons modernization program

since the end of the Cold War and announced that it will build up to the treaty levels. Meanwhile, the U.S. has to bear the majority of expensive reductions. The Administration has not announced what the U.S. nuclear posture will be under New START and therefore has not evaluated its impact on other states and actors. It is not wise to blindly call for more nuclear reductions under such circumstances.

- **Russia and China maintain massive nuclear weapons production complexes while the U.S. production capability is very limited.** In addition, the President breached his nuclear infrastructure modernization promises to the Senate. He said that he would speed up construction of the Chemical Metallurgy Research Replacement Facility at Los Alamos National Laboratory when the treaty entered into force, yet delayed it by five years. The President has also undermined funding for the U.S. nuclear infrastructure since taking office.¹

- **The reduction in disparity between U.S. and Russian tactical nuclear weapons can be achieved only at great cost to the U.S.** This is because Russia has at least 10-to-1 advantage in this class of weapons. Moscow has also increased the role of its tactical nuclear weapons in its national security strategy and considers first use of these weapons de-escalatory under some circumstances.²

- **At lower numbers, the U.S. would have to adjust its nuclear targeting policy.** Leadership

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bunkers and underground military facilities are more difficult to destroy than are cities. This means the U.S. needs a substantial arsenal of nuclear weapons if it wants to threaten these hard targets. Targeting civilian populations is not consistent with American values and does not constitute a credible deterrent in the eyes of U.S. adversaries.

- **Imprudent changes to the U.S. nuclear weapons posture will make allies nervous.** South Korea is under the constant threat of a nuclear-armed North Korea. Yet it does not have any nuclear weapons of its own, because it relies on the U.S. nuclear umbrella. Assurance is a complex calculation, and insensitive reductions may lead allies to doubt U.S. commitment to their security.
- **CTBT would make the U.S. less secure.** The U.S. Senate rejected the treaty in 1999 by a majority vote. The outcome reflected the treaty's fundamental problems with its substance and verification provisions.³ The U.S.'s continued nuclear testing moratorium has not convinced North Korea to stop its nuclear weapons program, nor has it prevented Russia and China from conducting very low-yield nuclear weapons tests.

Prudent Nuclear Deterrence Strategy. Last week, the House of Representatives passed the National Defense Authorization Act (NDAA). The law attempts to mitigate some of the shortfalls of the President's nuclear weapons policy. Such steps should be encouraged and expanded. A prudent nuclear deterrent strategy would:

- **Postpone elimination of nuclear weapons.** The U.S. is the only nuclear weapons state without a substantive nuclear weapons modernization program. At a time of decreasing budgets, expensive reductions of nuclear weapons divert funding from nuclear programs that are designed

to keep the U.S. nuclear deterrent safe, secure, and reliable. The U.S. should get its nuclear infrastructure in order before conducting more reductions.

- **Pursue any negotiated agreement with Moscow as a treaty.** The New START resolution of ratification declares, in reiteration of the current law, that "further arms reduction agreements obligating the United States to reduce or limit the Armed Forces or armaments of the United States in any militarily significant manner may be made only pursuant to the treaty making power of the President." The Senate and the House of Representatives should work together if the President tries to circumvent them by unilaterally reducing the U.S. nuclear weapons arsenal.
- **Advance a "protect and defend strategy."** This strategy recognizes that the world has not become any safer since the Cold War ended. It advances a comprehensive layered missile defense system and a strong, credible mix of offensive capabilities, both conventional and nuclear.
- **Correct the President's breaches regarding his commitment to U.S. nuclear infrastructure modernization.** Facilities responsible for keeping U.S. nuclear warheads safe, secure, and reliable have been underfunded for decades. It is essential that Congress and the Administration provide funding at least at the level of the updated Section 1251 of the NDAA of 2010. In doing so, Congress should ensure that appropriated resources advance U.S. nuclear weapons capabilities rather than fund dismantlement of U.S. nuclear weapons.
- **Maintain the nuclear triad.** The triad comprising of heavy bombers, intercontinental-range ballistic missiles, and submarines armed with submarine-launched ballistic missiles provides

1. See Michaela Dodge and Baker Spring, "Bait and Switch on Nuclear Modernization Must Stop," Heritage Foundation *Background* No. 2755, January 4, 2013, <http://www.heritage.org/research/reports/2013/01/bait-and-switch-on-nuclear-modernization-must-stop>.

2. Mark Schneider, "Future Russian Strategic Challenges," remarks at the Air Force Association/Reserve Officer Association Breakfast Series, May 10, 2013, <http://www.afa.org/hbs/transcripts/2013/May%2010%20-%20Mark%20Schneider.pdf> (accessed June 20, 2013).

3. Ambassador C. Paul Robinson, John Foster, and Thomas Scheber, "The Comprehensive Test Ban Treaty: Questions and Challenges," Heritage Foundation *Lecture* No. 1218, November 7, 2012, <http://www.heritage.org/research/lecture/2012/11/the-comprehensive-test-ban-treaty-questions-and-challenges>.

decision makers with the widest range of options during a conflict to signal resolve and deter aggression. These systems will continue to be indispensable in the future.

- **Reiterate commitment to NATO's tactical nuclear weapons.** The President stated that he would seek bold reductions in U.S. and Russian tactical weapons in Europe. The Administration should seek reductions in disparity in tactical nuclear weapons overall, not just in Europe. Such a position was refused by all previous Administrations.

Critical to Credibility. Arbitrary and unrealistic assumptions about the current world should not

guide U.S. nuclear weapons posture. Modernizing the U.S. nuclear weapons arsenal and guaranteeing the vitality of its nuclear weapons complex are critical to maintaining the credibility of the U.S. nuclear weapons arsenal—on which more than 30 allies around the world rely. Thankfully, there are steps that Congress can take to mitigate some of the Administration's flawed policies.

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