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U.S. Nuclear Weapons Policy: After Ukraine, Time to Reassess Strategic Posture

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Russia recently invaded Ukraine and annexed Crimea in blatant disregard of Ukraine's territorial sovereignty. Russia's willingness to challenge the status quo and its disregard for its arms control obligations have important implications for U.S. nuclear weapons policy. The U.S. can take many steps to improve and strengthen its overall nuclear posture regardless of Russian actions in Ukraine.

Russia Is Violating Its Arms Control Obligations. The Administration has made many concessions to improve relations with Russia.¹ Some of the most significant concessions are in the New Strategic Arms Reductions Treaty (New START). Among these concessions are the absence of a strong verification regime, limits on U.S. missile defense options, and mandates that the U.S. shoulder a majority of the nuclear weapons reductions. These conditions have resulted in a treaty that is grossly lopsided in Russia's favor.

In addition, Russian violations of the Intermediate-Range Nuclear Forces (INF) Treaty have been widely reported.² Russian violations and circumventions of the INF Treaty pose a threat to U.S. allies in Europe due to the undeniable fact that they fall within

the range of Russian weapons. It would be unwise to ignore the danger these missiles pose to NATO allies.

Improve U.S. Strategic Posture. Given Russia's blatant aggression and open disdain for its arms control obligations and U.S. national interests, Washington should take steps to improve its nuclear posture. The U.S. should:

- **Withdraw from New START.** New START does not provide predictability in U.S.-Russia strategic relations, especially since Russia has launched the most extensive nuclear weapons modernization program since the end of the Cold War while the U.S. allows its nuclear weapons to atrophy.
- **Withdraw from the INF Treaty.** Due to Russian violations, the treaty has lost its relevance and has created a false sense of security in the U.S. Washington should not implement any arms control agreements that Russia has repeatedly violated.
- **Stop unilateral nuclear weapons reductions.** The U.S. is projecting weakness by reducing its own arsenal while Russia builds up its forces. There is a fundamental disparity between U.S. and Russian obligations to international security. The U.S. provides nuclear security guarantees to over 30 countries around the world, while Russia, rather than safeguarding other nations, threatens them instead. It is imperative that the Administration recommit to NATO's function as a nuclear alliance and sustain and modernize U.S. and NATO forward-deployed systems, including dual-capable aircraft, B-61 tactical nuclear weapons, and dual-capable long-range stand-off missiles.

This paper, in its entirety, can be found at
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- **Modernize U.S. nuclear weapons.** U.S. nuclear weapons and delivery systems are aging. The Obama Administration failed to provide the funding it promised prior to New START ratification. In addition, the Budget Control Act is increasing pressure on funding for U.S. weapons systems. Both of these constraints will delay nuclear infrastructure improvements, including further delay of nuclear certifications for the next-generation bomber and the development of the follow-on strategic submarine. These delays increase the overall costs of the programs and leave the U.S. less capable of responding to unexpected developments in the nuclear programs of other nations.
- **Consider the benefits of yield-producing experiments for the U.S. nuclear weapons program.** Conducting very small-scale yield-producing experiments would benefit the science that underpins the program; indeed, China and Russia are already conducting such experiments.³
- **Advance a “protect and defend” strategic posture.** At the core of today’s more dangerous world is a fundamental asymmetry between the values of the U.S. and the values of its adversaries. While the U.S. values its citizens, economic prosperity, and institutions, U.S. adversaries value leadership survival above all. The U.S. should develop precise means to credibly threaten what

its adversaries value and deploy both passive and active defenses to remove the benefits adversaries might gain in attacking the U.S. or its allies.

- **Re-evaluate its strategic nuclear posture.** The Pentagon currently bases its nuclear posture on the notion that “Russia and the United States are no longer adversaries, and prospects for military confrontation have declined dramatically.”⁴ In light of Russia’s demonstrated recklessness, this is no longer valid.

Toward a Safer World. Russia has invaded two countries in the past six years and just this month has illegitimately changed Ukraine’s borders. It is violating its arms control obligations, increasing the role of nuclear weapons in its national security, and extensively modernizing its nuclear forces, including building new nuclear weapons.

The U.S. remains the only nuclear weapons state that is not modernizing its nuclear forces. The U.S. should reassess its nuclear weapons posture to better deal with realities of the 21st century.

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1. The Heritage Foundation, “Reset Regret: Heritage Foundation Recommendations,” Heritage Foundation *WebMemo* No. 3334, August 5, 2011, <http://www.heritage.org/research/reports/2011/08/reset-regret-heritage-foundation-recommendations>.

2. See Michaela Dodge and Ariel Cohen, “Russia’s Arms Control Violations: What the U.S. Should Do,” Heritage Foundation *Issue Brief* No. 4150, December 11, 2013, <http://www.heritage.org/research/reports/2013/12/russia-s-arms-control-violations-what-the-us-should-do>.

3. See Michaela Dodge, “Keeping Nuclear Testing on the Table: A National Security Imperative,” Heritage Foundation *Backgrounder* No. 2770, February 27, 2013, <http://www.heritage.org/research/reports/2013/02/keeping-nuclear-testing-on-the-table-a-national-security-imperative>.

4. U.S. Department of Defense, *Nuclear Posture Review Report*, April 2010, <http://www.defense.gov/npr/docs/2010%20nuclear%20posture%20review%20report.pdf> (accessed March 21, 2014).