Rising tensions, nuclear modernizations: How Washington can turn down the heat

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To cite this article: Lawrence J. Korb (2017) Rising tensions, nuclear modernizations: How Washington can turn down the heat, Bulletin of the Atomic Scientists, 73:3, 173-176, DOI: 10.1080/00963402.2017.1315038

To link to this article: http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/00963402.2017.1315038

Published online: 18 Apr 2017.

Article views: 36

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ABSTRACT
Statesmen such as William Perry and Mikhail Gorbachev are growing increasingly concerned about global nuclear tensions. Their concern springs in large measure from the nuclear modernizations being conducted by all major nuclear powers. The United States has embarked on a trillion-dollar modernization program—motivated partly by Russia’s increasing aggressiveness abroad and by indications that Vladimir Putin might be willing to use nuclear weapons. Donald Trump, meanwhile, makes erratic, inconsistent, and impulsive statements about nuclear weapons, causing many to argue that his sole authority to launch these weapons should be taken away. Nuclear tensions will be dampened somewhat by fiscal pressures in both Washington and Moscow and by the New Strategic Arms Reduction Treaty (New START). Nonetheless, the United States should reduce nuclear dangers by paring down some aspects of its modernization program; agreeing to extend New START; adopting a no-first-use policy and ending hair-trigger alert for nuclear weapons; better educating Donald Trump about arms control agreements and nuclear risks; and stopping or slowing plans for ballistic missile defense installations in Poland and Romania.

KEYWORDS
Barack Obama; China; Donald Trump; Mikhail Gorbachev; New START; nuclear modernization; nuclear weapons; Russia; United States; Vladimir Putin

William Perry, a former secretary of defense and one of the architects of the US nuclear triad, openly worries about an accidental nuclear war. Gen. James Clapper, a career intelligence officer who recently stepped down as director of national intelligence, is concerned that Russia and the United States could enter “a Cold War-like spiral.” Mikhail Gorbachev, former leader of the Soviet Union, writes that “the nuclear threat once again seems real” and that “[r]elations between the great powers have been going from bad to worse for several years” (Gorbachev 2017).

The situation appears so dire that the Bulletin of the Atomic Scientists has moved its Doomsday Clock forward 30 seconds, bringing the time to two and a half minutes to midnight. The clock has not been this close to midnight since 1953, when the Soviet Union tested its first thermo-nuclear weapon—just months after the United States had done the same. Going on three decades since the Cold War’s end, the risk of nuclear war has reached levels not seen since the Cold War’s height.

Why are statesmen such as Perry and Gorbachev, along with the members of the Bulletin’s Science and Security Board, so concerned about the current nuclear situation? For two main reasons. First, one hears an increasing amount of loose talk on both the US and Russian sides about actually using nuclear weapons instead of just keeping them for deterrence. Second, the three major nuclear powers—the United States, Russia, and China—are all significantly upgrading their nuclear arsenals.

Dueling modernizations
The United States—which together with Russia accounts for more than 90% of the world’s nuclear stockpile—has embarked on a trillion-dollar nuclear modernization program. The program will update and improve not only the three legs of Washington’s nuclear triad but its tactical nuclear weapons as well. Paradoxically, it was President Obama who, after calling for “the peace and security of a world without nuclear weapons,” initiated the build-up.

He did so for three reasons. First, the nuclear triad had not been significantly modernized since the 1980s, so Obama felt he had to lay the groundwork for a modernization program. Second, in order to get the two-thirds majority needed in the US Senate to ratify the New Strategic Arms Reduction Treaty (New START), concluded with Russia in 2010, Obama had to agree to modernize all three legs of the triad. Third, after the ratification of New START and the return of Vladimir Putin to Russia’s presidency, Russia had
become more aggressive in both Eastern Europe and the Middle East – and Putin had indicated some willingness to actually employ nuclear weapons, not just use them for deterrence (Pifer 2016). Still, it is one of the ironies of this new nuclear age that President Obama left office having trimmed the US nuclear arsenal by a smaller percentage than any of his three immediate predecessors. President George W. Bush reduced the nuclear stockpile by 50%, his father by 43%, and Bill Clinton by 28% – while Obama reduced the stockpile by 24%.

In any event, Moscow has been actively seeking to reinforce its great-power status since Putin returned to the presidency. Russia has sought to establish influence and control along its periphery, has worked to undermine Western influence and alliances, and has attempted to undermine democratic institutions in many Western states.

The Russian president sees upgrading and modernizing his nuclear arsenal as a vital part of this overall strategy. Russia’s nuclear modernization plans include two new types of intercontinental ballistic missiles (ICBM), a new type of submarine-launched ballistic missile (SLBM), a new class of ballistic missile submarine, and modernized heavy bombers. By secretly deploying a new cruise missile, Russia has already violated the 1987 Intermediate-Range Nuclear Forces (INF) Treaty (Gordon 2017). In addition, Russia’s military doctrine states that Moscow not only reserves the right to utilize nuclear weapons in response to a nuclear attack against it or its allies, but also in the event of conventional aggression when the very existence of the state is under threat. In other words, the Russian president is willing to use nuclear weapons first.

The US and Russian nuclear modernizations are matters of concern – but it is important to see them in proper context. Yes, the United States and Russia are upgrading their arsenals, but both countries are still constrained by the New START agreement, which requires each side to reduce its strategic arsenal to 1550 weapons by 2018. Moreover, the planned modernization programs in both countries will be prohibitively expensive.

The US modernization plan will cost about $400 billion over its first decade and $1 trillion over the next 30 years. It will be exceedingly difficult for the US military to fully fund these programs while also providing sufficient resources for more pressing challenges such as fighting ISIS and defending against cyber attacks – or for conventional programs including shipbuilding and aircraft. In fact, both the Navy and the Air Force (Freedberg Jr. 2014) have requested that their nuclear programs be funded outside their normal budget accounts.

Russia’s fiscal situation is even more dire. Moscow is waging two wars. It is hampered by lower global oil prices and by the US and EU sanctions imposed because of Russia’s invasion of Ukraine and annexation of Crimea. In addition, Russian missiles are not meant to last as long as their US counterparts – as nuclear weapons expert Jeffrey Lewis has pointed out, Russia’s weapons are designed to incorporate incremental improvements every decade or so (Lockie 2016). With all this, Russia will find it difficult to fully fund proposed nuclear upgrades on the projected timetable.

China, meanwhile – a nation that completed its nuclear triad in 1982 and whose total inventory of ballistic missiles capable of carrying a nuclear warhead is a little more than 500 – is also modernizing and expanding its triad. It is developing an improved ICBM, a mobile ICBM that is MIRV capable, an SLBM, and a new type of ballistic missile submarine. In addition to this modernization of its nuclear-armed missile forces, China is developing a stealth strike aircraft and testing a hypersonic glide missile (Stronjnik 2016).

Still, China is not nearly as grave a source of nuclear concern as Russia is. Beijing has not changed its no-first-use policy, even though Russia and the United States have failed to adopt no-first-use policies of their own, and China’s arsenal remains much smaller than its US counterpart. Meanwhile President Trump, after questioning Washington’s one-China policy ahead of his inauguration, has now made it clear that he wants a constructive relationship with Beijing.

Dampening the tensions

Donald Trump – both as a candidate and so far as president – has badly muddied the waters where nuclear issues are concerned. He has discussed the possibility that Japan and South Korea should develop their own nuclear weapons. He has said he would like to greatly strengthen and expand US nuclear capability. He has openly contemplated an arms race with other nuclear powers. He has rejected Putin’s offer to extend New START’s expiration date to 2026 from the current date of 2021. On the other hand, he has said he is interested in making good deals with Russia and has specifically expressed a willingness to drop sanctions against Moscow if Russia agrees to a new nuclear arms control deal. All in all, Trump’s statements on nuclear weapons have been so erratic, inconsistent, and impulsive that many have argued in favor of taking away from him the sole authority to launch nuclear weapons (Holland 2017).
But what nuclear policies will Trump actually implement? Shortly after taking office, he directed the Pentagon to conduct a nuclear posture review, the first since 2010. The stated goal of the review is to ensure that the US nuclear arsenal is “modern, robust, flexible, resilient, ready, and appropriately tailored to deter 21st-century threats and reassure our allies.” While one cannot predict the outcome with any certainty, the review seems unlikely to endorse declarations in the 2010 review that the United States would not develop new warhead designs and that nuclear life extension programs would not support new military capabilities or new military missions. Rather, Trump’s review is more likely to be influenced by a December 2016 report from the Defense Science Board, a blue-ribbon defense panel. The report urges Trump to consider increasing the number of low-yield weapons in the US arsenal, which would provide “a tailored nuclear option for limited use.” In other words, a Trump administration should be prepared to fight a limited nuclear war (Donnelly 2017).

Following such a path would be ill advised. Instead, the United States should take a variety of steps that can help prevent nuclear tensions with Russia from spinning out of control. These steps fall into five categories.

First, Washington should make several changes to its nuclear modernization plans that could, in a cost-effective way, ensure strategic stability—while not reducing the number of threats that the United States can hold at risk. Namely, Washington should build 10 instead of 12 new ballistic missile submarines, cancel the new air-launched cruise missile, eliminate the tactical mission for US nuclear forces, and gradually reduce the size of the ICBM force. These steps will not only save more than $100 billion—this will also lower the risk of an accidental nuclear war. At the same time, because Russia cannot achieve a militarily significant advantage over the United States through any plausible expansion of its strategic nuclear forces—even if it were to break out from the constraints of New START—these steps will not undermine deterrence. Indeed, they could be used bargaining chips to induce Russia to make changes in its own nuclear arsenal. For example, the United States could cancel the new nuclear-armed cruise missile in return for Russia’s cancelation of its own nuclear cruise missile program (Korb and Mount 2016).

Second, the United States should accept Putin’s offer to extend the New START treaty for an additional five years. The extension would contribute to stability and give Washington and Moscow time to pursue another arms control agreement to further reduce nuclear arsenals.

Third, the United States should formally adopt a no-first-use policy and take its nuclear weapons off hair-trigger alert. These measures would help undermine Putin’s claim that he might need to use nuclear weapons before Washington uses its own. These policy changes would also ratify the obvious—that it is highly unlikely the United States would ever use nuclear weapons unless subjected to a nuclear attack. Moreover, taking weapons off hair-trigger alert would diminish the possibility of an accidental launch.

Fourth, President Trump needs to become better informed about nuclear arms agreements and the risks of an inadvertent nuclear war. One way he can do this is by listening to his new secretary of defense, General James Mattis, who has publicly expressed doubts about certain aspects of nuclear modernization.

Fifth, the administration should cancel, or at least put on hold, the ballistic missile defense program it is planning to install in Romania and Poland. The system, whose purpose is to help defend NATO allies from an Iranian nuclear attack, is not necessary now that a nuclear deal with Iran is in place—and it has not been proven to work. Moreover, canceling deployment of the system would deprive Putin, who perceives it as directed against Russia, of a justification for violating the INF Treaty (Edwards 2017). Washington can also promise not to expand NATO into Georgia and Ukraine—a step that would undermine Putin’s argument that NATO is seeking to damage Russian security. The United States can also ratify the Comprehensive Nuclear Test-Ban Treaty. The United States does not intend to test nuclear weapons anyway, and US ratification would make it more difficult for Putin to withdraw from the treaty and resume underground testing.

While it is not certain that these steps would immediately defuse the current dangerous nuclear situation, they certainly would not aggravate it. Eventually, they might create conditions such as those that allowed Gorbachev and Ronald Reagan to declare at their 1985 Geneva summit that “Nuclear war cannot be won and must never be fought. Our two nations will not seek military superiority.”

Some observers will argue that President Trump could never possibly take the steps suggested here—but many felt that Reagan would never take the steps toward arms control and reconciliation with Russia that in fact he took. And Trump has already surprised many by embracing key pillars of Obama’s foreign policy.

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author.
Funding
This research received no specific grant from any funding agency in the public, commercial, or not-for-profit sectors.

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Lawrence J. Korb is a senior fellow at the Center for American Progress. He is also an adjunct professor of security studies at Georgetown University. Prior to joining the center, he was senior fellow and director of national security studies at the Council on Foreign Relations. Korb served as assistant secretary of defense (manpower, reserve affairs, installations, and logistics) from 1981 through 1985. In that position, he administered about 70% of the defense budget. Korb served on active duty for four years as a naval flight officer, and retired from the Naval Reserve with the rank of captain.

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