In his State of the Union Address, President Barack Obama reiterated that the United States will continue to seek to reduce the size of the still-bloated U.S. and Russian nuclear arsenals. Obama said the United States would "engage Russia to seek further reductions in our nuclear arsenals."

According to recent news reports from the Center for Public Integrity and The New York Times, the Obama administration, backed by the Defense Department and the Joint Chiefs of Staff, has determined that the number of deployed strategic warheads in the U.S. arsenal can be lowered to 1,000-1,100, in tandem with further Russian reductions, while still ensuring U.S. security and savings scarce defense dollars.

Senators' Concerns Based on Faulty Assumptions
Unfortunately, two key Republican leaders in the Senate have responded by saying they will not consider a new arms control treaty unless the administration meets unrealistic and vague demands for spending tens of billions of dollars on a Cold War-sized strategic nuclear force during a time of budget austerity.

Senators Bob Corker (R-Tenn.), ranking member of the Foreign Relations Committee, and Jim Inhofe (R-Okla.), ranking member of the Armed Services Committee, wrote in a Feb. 26 op-ed that, "no arms-control treaty is likely even to get a vote in the Senate" until the U.S. has a modern nuclear infrastructure "capable of responding to any future challenges to the country's strategic interests."

And, contrary to the conventional wisdom and the assessments of military planners about the type of nuclear force needed to deter 21st century nuclear dangers, Corker and Inhofe assert that a smaller nuclear force would be insufficient to deter threats against the United States or its allies.

In practical terms, the U. S. ability to deter nuclear threats would not be diminished in any way if the United States were to reduce its deployed nuclear weapons stockpile as the administration is proposing.

The 2010 New START treaty limits the U.S. and Russian arsenals to 1,550 deployed strategic warheads each by 2018. Each side has thousands more non-deployed and/or non-strategic warheads. Further reductions are prudent and sensible.

Other than Russia, the only potential U.S. adversary with a long-range nuclear capability is China, which has no more than 50 to 75 single-warhead intercontinental ballistic missiles, according to the Pentagon. If the United States reduces its deployed strategic arsenal by one-third, Washington would still maintain an overwhelming numerical edge of more than 10-to-1 over China.

As a Defense Department strategy review released in Jan. 2012 determined: "It is possible that our deterrence goals can be achieved with a smaller nuclear force, which would reduce the number of nuclear weapons in our inventory as well as their role in U.S. national security strategy."

Corker and Inhofe also assert without any evidence that "as America rushes to disarm," some potential adversaries may be encouraged "to acquire or expand their nuclear arsenals."
In reality, the United States is not rushing to disarm and another round of bilateral U.S.-Russian arms reductions would more likely discourage—not encourage—Russia to forego planned strategic nuclear force modernization of its own, create new opportunities to begin verifiable cuts in Russia's sizeable Cold War-era stockpile of tactical bombs, and open up options to prod other nuclear-armed states, particularly China, to take a more active role in the nuclear risk reduction process.

**Nuclear Modernization Funding Myths and Realities**

The central argument of the Corker-Inhofe op-ed is that the Obama administration is not meeting its political commitments to fund the U.S. nuclear weapons infrastructure.

This assertion misrepresents the New START debate of 2010 and the nature of the commitments the administration made to the Senate regarding future funding for Department of Defense and National Nuclear Security Administration (NNSA) nuclear weapons projects over the next decade. The administration made clear in its Nov. 2011 report to Congress on future nuclear weapons spending (known as the [Section 1251 report](https://www.armscontrol.org) that its budget "projections" are not "fixed in stone" but were most accurately described as a "snapshot in time" that will be "evaluated each year and adjusted as necessary." There was a clear understanding that the budget projections would change.

Nevertheless, Corker and Inhofe try to assign blame to the Obama administration for Congress' decision to appropriate $770 million less for NNSA weapons activities than originally proposed by the Obama administration. But the administration requested $7.6 billion for fiscal year 2013, a 5 percent increase over the previous year at a time of declining budgets. Moreover, it was House Republicans that cut the administration's full budget request for fiscal 2012. Congress holds the purse strings, not the White House.

Corker and Inhofe's arguments ignore the reality that the long-term funding estimates for the nuclear triad and the nuclear weapons complex were developed before the 2011 Budget Control Act passed, before the "super-committee" failed to agree on a path forward, and before mandatory "sequestration" budget cuts went into effect on March 1.

The new and more restrictive fiscal environment will require Congress and the administration to make smarter, less costly choices about how to maintain U.S. nuclear forces. Demands to increase NNSA funding each year for the next decade are unrealistic.

Going forward, the administration and the Congress will need to work together to ensure the nuclear weapons labs and NNSA are focused on the highest priority stockpile maintenance tasks, the most important and cost-effective warhead life extension strategies, and only the most important infrastructure revitalization projects.

Not only have the fiscal realities changed, but some of the technical assumptions behind the 2010 plans for modernizing the nuclear weapons complex have also been revised, which, in turn, open up possibilities for budget savings.

The proposed plutonium facility at Los Alamos National Lab in New Mexico is a good example. When it was first designed, NNSA estimated that the facility would need to support 50-80 plutonium parts per year. But since then we have learned that the parts last [decades longer](https://www.armscontrol.org) than originally thought, meaning that fewer parts would need to be produced each year.

Now, the NNSA believes it can avoid building a new $6 billion facility and, instead, maintaining the U.S. nuclear arsenal with the plutonium lab facilities that already exist at much lower cost.

The two Senators also assert that "any changes" to U.S. missile defense plans, as may be necessary to secure Russian support for arms reductions, "will be a clear nonstarter for the U.S. Senate."

The Obama administration has said repeatedly that it will not agree to binding limits on missile interceptor capabilities. But not all missile defense plans work out as expected, and changes to the current plan are going to be necessary and are prudent.

The Pentagon's [own analysis](https://www.armscontrol.org) has found that the missile defense system planned for Europe to
intercept future long-range missiles from Iran, known as the SM-3 IIB, may not be effective, and that "modifications are needed" to how the system would operate and where it would be based.

**U.S. Nuclear Policy and Proliferation**

Corker and Inhofe also erroneously claim that the Obama administration's "drive toward zero" nuclear weapons has failed because it has not led Iran and North Korea to abandon their nuclear ambitions.

To be clear, the Obama administration and proponents of right-sizing the U.S. and Russian nuclear stockpiles do not claim that further superpower nuclear arms reductions would directly lead other states, such as Iran, to give up their nuclear ambitions. Such a direct link is overly simplistic.

As then-Under Secretary of State for Arms Control and International Security Ellen Tauscher said in a speech in Omaha on July 29, 2010:

"We are not so naïve as to believe that problem states will end their proliferation programs if the United States and Russia reduce our nuclear arsenals. But we are confident that progress in this area will reinforce the central role of the NPT and help us build support to sanction or engage states on favorable terms to us. Our collective ability to bring the weight of international pressure against proliferators would be undermined by a lack of effort towards disarmament."

Progress on U.S. and Russian arsenal reductions are an essential part of building international support to reduce a range of nuclear risks. We depend on other nations to protect weapons-usable materials, support economic sanctions and enforce trade embargoes. And those nations, including our closest allies in NATO and elsewhere, support continued U.S. and Russian arsenal reductions.

**Encouraging Russian Hardliners**

By resisting further negotiated U.S.-Russian nuclear reductions, Corker and Inhofe are aligning themselves with nationalist forces in Moscow who believe Russia is still locked in a Cold War struggle with the United States and must build new nuclear weapons systems to counter superior U.S. nuclear and conventional military capabilities.

A more sensible and prudent approach, as President Obama has suggested, is to pursue further verifiable reductions in all types of U.S. and Russian nuclear weaponry.

But if defenders of the nuclear status quo in Washington make that too difficult, reciprocal reductions of strategic forces below New START levels should be considered and pursued.

As the State Department's International Security Advisory Board's Nov. 27, 2012 report suggested, Russia and the United States could seek additional reductions on the basis of a mutual understanding rather than a formal treaty. Such an understanding "can be quicker and less politically costly, relative to treaties with adversarial negotiations and difficult ratification processes," the board wrote.

Such thinking is not without precedent. President George W. Bush was prepared to go even further in 2001 with significant unilateral reductions to the deployed U.S. strategic arsenal. "We don't need arms control negotiations to reduce our weaponry in a significant way ... and, at the same time, keep the peace," Bush said on Nov. 13, 2001. The United States and Russia would later codify mutual reductions (to less than 2,200 strategic deployed warheads) through the 2002 Strategic Offensive Reductions Treaty.

**Bottom Line**

As George Shultz, Bill Perry, Henry Kissinger, and Sam Nunn recently wrote: "A global effort is needed to reduce reliance on nuclear weapons, prevent their spread, and ultimately end them as a threat to the world. It will take leadership, creative approaches and thoughtful understanding of the perils of inaction."

In the months ahead, U.S. policymakers must overcome petty partisan politics to support sensible measures that help address today's grave nuclear challenges.--**Tom Z. Collina and Daryl G. Kimball**
###

The Arms Control Association (ACA) is an independent, membership-based organization dedicated to providing information and practical policy solutions to address the dangers posed by the world’s most dangerous weapons. ACA publishes the monthly journal, Arms Control Today.

- Daryl G. Kimball
- United States
- Russia
- U.S. Nuclear Policy & Budget
- Disarmament
- Treaties and Agreements
- US-Russia Nuclear Arms Control

**Source URL:** https://www.armscontrol.org/issue-briefs/2013-03/threats-block-russian-us-nuclear-cuts-ill-founded