

Mr. President, 'Yes, We Can'

- [Arms Control Today](#)

July/August 2015

[By Daryl G. Kimball](#)

Barack Obama came into office with a deep understanding of the dangers of nuclear weapons and a strong commitment and a plan to address them. On the occasion of the 70th anniversary of the nuclear age, it is time for him to rejuvenate U.S. leadership on nonproliferation and disarmament.

President Obama's stirring April 2009 Prague address on steps toward a world without nuclear weapons kicked off a busy and successful phase. He promptly negotiated and won Senate approval of the modest but important New Strategic Arms Reduction Treaty (New START) with Russia. U.S. diplomats helped win consensus on a detailed action plan to strengthen the nuclear Nonproliferation Treaty in 2010. Obama initiated a series of nuclear security summits to accelerate global efforts to lock down nuclear materials. He launched a new and fruitful policy of pressure and engagement with Iran to secure verifiable constraints on that country's sensitive nuclear activities.

But aside from progress in the Iran nuclear talks since 2013, the president's efforts have lost focus and momentum, only in part because the Republicans have seized the majority in the Senate and tensions with Russia have worsened.

In his Prague speech, Obama pledged an "immediate and aggressive" effort to ratify the Comprehensive Test Ban Treaty, but has not followed through, despite having a strong technical and military case for the 1996 pact.

Since 2011, the U.S.-Russian nuclear disarmament dialogue has atrophied. Obama announced in 2013 that the U.S. arsenal could be cut by one-third more and still meet deterrence "requirements." He proposed renewed talks with Russia to slash both countries' arsenals further. Unfortunately, Russian President Vladimir Putin has rejected that proposal and has failed to offer a substantive alternative.

At the same time, Obama and Putin are pursuing plans for massive nuclear force modernization to preserve their excessive strategic capabilities for decades to come. Although senior Pentagon leaders warn that key elements of the \$350 billion, 10-year U.S. plan are "unaffordable," Obama's team has failed to pursue more-practical, cost-saving options.

Meanwhile, South Asian rivals India and Pakistan continue to amass more fissile material and deploy new nuclear delivery systems, China has begun to put multiple warheads on its arsenal of 75 long-range missiles, and North Korea has tested nuclear weapons and amassed more bomb material as Pyongyang and Washington haggle over the conditions for resuming talks.

Such developments led former Defense Secretary William Perry to warn last month, "We are about to begin a new round in the nuclear arms race unless some brake is put on it right now."

Worse still, Russian officials are reverting to dangerous Cold War rhetoric and veiled nuclear threats. Washington must not reciprocate. U.S. Defense Secretary Ash Carter said June 21 on his way to a NATO meeting, "We all understand the gravity of nuclear dangers. We continue to deter, to have a strong deterrent and prepare to respond."

Mr. President, 'Yes, We Can'

Published on Arms Control Association (<https://www.armscontrol.org>)

Respond? With several hundred nuclear weapons available for striking targets within minutes of a launch order, there is no response that would not risk the total annihilation of both countries and the United States' NATO partners. Obama's team must lower, not increase, nuclear tensions even as it counters Russian meddling in Ukraine, beginning with the resumption of military-to-military contacts with Russia. At the same time, Obama must actively pursue new proposals to halt nuclear buildups elsewhere around the globe.

First, Obama should invite Putin into an arrangement under which the two leaders would jointly accelerate the pace of reductions under New START and cut their respective strategic arsenals to 1,000 deployed warheads and 500 delivery vehicles. In addition, Obama could offer to resume formal talks on missile defense capabilities and deployments to assuage Russian concerns, real and imagined.

Second, Obama must rein in the Pentagon's Strangelove-ian nuclear force modernization scheme. To start, he should halt plans for 1,000 to 1,100 new, air-launched cruise missiles, which would cost some \$20-30 billion and are designed for nuclear war-fighting, not deterrence. The White House should also put the brakes on Air Force plans to spend \$62 billion on a new fleet of land-based intercontinental ballistic missiles.

Third, Obama should help initiate a new global nuclear restraint and disarmament dialogue. He should call for other nuclear-armed states to freeze the overall size of their stockpiles as the United States and Russia reduce theirs. He should signal support for high-level summits on multilateral nuclear disarmament involving nuclear-armed and non-nuclear-weapon states. Such a process could begin in Hiroshima, where Japan will host the 2016 Group of Seven summit.

In his final months, Obama must also try to reinforce the nuclear test ban by seeking support from the UN Security Council for a resolution that determines that nuclear testing by any state is a threat to international peace and security.

He cannot do it alone. But with more energy and creativity and the backing of congressional allies, international partners, and the many constituencies that support the "Prague vision," Obama can still achieve important breakthroughs to reduce nuclear dangers.

Source URL: <https://www.armscontrol.org/act/2015-07/focus/mr-president-yes-we>