

Washington’s “second nuclear age”

Andre Damon
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With virtually no discussion in the media and no mention in the presidential election campaign, the United States is moving ahead with its trillion-dollar nuclear weapons modernization program.

Last week, the Stockholm International Peace Research Institute published a report noting that the Obama administration is leading a global expansion of nuclear weapons programs. It said the US “plans to spend \$348 billion during 2015–24 on maintaining and comprehensively updating its nuclear forces,” adding that “Some estimates suggest that the USA’s nuclear weapon modernization programme may cost up to \$1 trillion over the next 30 years.”

Hans Kristensen, a co-author of the report, declared, “The ambitious US modernization plan presented by the Obama administration is in stark contrast to President Barack Obama’s pledge to reduce the number of nuclear weapons and the role they play in US national security strategy.”

In the latest milestone in this ongoing process, the House of Representatives last week voted down an amendment that would have slowed the development of a \$37 billion program to construct a new nuclear-armed cruise missile called the Long Range Standoff Weapon.

Behind the scenes, the program had met with muted opposition from sections of the military establishment, who criticized it on the grounds of its exorbitant cost and the fact that it would make nuclear war, either intentional or accidental, more likely.

“Because they can be launched without warning and come in both nuclear and conventional variants, cruise missiles are a uniquely destabilizing type of weapon,” wrote former defense secretary William J. Perry and former assistant defense secretary Andy Weber in a comment published in the *Wall Street Journal* last year.

They warned that such weapons, which do not trace the tell-tale arc into space of ballistic missiles, are hard to detect and impossible to distinguish from their

conventional, or nonnuclear, counterparts. This makes deadly miscalculations by other countries more likely. However, with the latest House vote, such concerns were brushed aside.

Given the enormous nuclear superiority of the United States over all other countries in the world, why the rush to pour ever more money into the development of new nuclear weapons and delivery systems, especially ones that are so dangerous as to give pause even to sections of the military establishment?

The current US nuclear arsenal, which is large enough to kill everyone on the planet many times over, is a remnant of a period in which the use of nuclear weapons was envisioned as a last resort, and when the launching of a nuclear weapon was assumed to mean “mutually assured destruction.” During most of the Cold War, the idea that a nuclear war could actually be winnable was confined to the political fringe, and the theories of RAND Corporation military strategist Herman Kahn were pilloried—most famously in Stanley Kubrick’s *Dr. Strangelove*.

But in what is becoming known in policy circles as the “second nuclear age,” the thinking expressed by General Buck Turgidson in Kubrick’s film—that the consequences of a nuclear exchange are “modest and acceptable,” even though the United States might get its “hair mussed”—is becoming mainstream doctrine.

A report published earlier this year by the Center for Strategic and Budgetary Assessments titled *Rethinking Armageddon* outlines a scenario in which the US responds to an intervention by Russian forces in Latvia. The Joint Chiefs of Staff give the president four options, three of which involve the use of nuclear weapons.

As a report published last year by the Center for Strategic and International Studies (CSIS) noted, “The scenarios for nuclear employment have changed greatly since the ‘balance of terror’ between the two global

superpowers.” As a result, the “second nuclear age” involves combatants “thinking through how they might actually employ a nuclear weapon, both early in a conflict and in a discriminate manner.”

The highly influential Washington think tank called for maximizing “flexibility and credibility” by moving to a “smaller but newer responsive stockpile, lower and variable yields, and special effect weapons, a more diversified set of delivery systems, greater distribution and forward deployment, and greater integration with nonnuclear capabilities.”

Components of this plan include the stationing of missile defense systems on the borders of Russia and China, such as the one installed in Romania last month, and the domination of key waterways, such as the South China Sea, Baltic Sea and Black Sea. These policies are intended to make it difficult for Russia and China to retaliate to a nuclear first strike, including by means of ballistic missile submarines.

But for all the money and resources being poured into US nuclear dominance, the idea that a nuclear war against Russia or China is winnable, even with the most advanced weapons systems a trillion dollars can buy, is just as insane as it was during the height of the Cold War. The use of low-yield “tactical” nuclear weapons will very likely escalate into a conflict in which billions of people, or even the whole of humanity, will die.

The doctrine of the viability of a nuclear first strike mirrors the grandiose delusion, expressed in the 1998 book *The Future of War* by George and Meredith Friedman, that the advent of precision-guided bombs and missiles would make US military force uncontested in the 21st century, a theory disproven in the military debacles in Iraq, Afghanistan and Libya.

The relentless scheming of US military planners has its roots in deep-going historical process. The American ruling class, facing growing popular opposition at home and the long-term decline of its global economic power, seeks to resolve the intractable crisis it faces through military means. Its reckless actions have already resulted in one disastrous and bloody adventure after another. However, like a gambling addict, it seeks to win by upping the stakes, bringing into its crosshairs not only Russia and China, but the entire planet.

Despite the distinction of having waged war for nearly eight consecutive years, the Obama

administration faces mounting pressure from a military and political establishment that is seeking an even more aggressive display of military force in the Middle East and against Russia and China. These pressures will erupt after the November election, with incalculable consequences, whether it is Clinton or Trump who is elected.



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