

Nuclear Weapons: What Should Our Policy Be?

We can see the results of terrorism, environmental issues, and disease. Yet for most of us nuclear weapons remain out of sight and out of mind. Many experts believe that nuclear weapons are the greatest challenge we face. Some believe that they are simply too dangerous and that countries should agree to give them up. Others believe that they are essential for our defense. Some also worry that it is simply a matter of time before one is used against the United States.

What follows are three policy “Options” that frame the current debate. They are designed to help you think about a range of possible policy directions and the ramifications of each. The three options are put in stark terms to highlight very different policy approaches. Each option includes some underlying beliefs, goals, and policies. Each also includes a set of criticisms designed to help you think carefully about the trade-offs involved.

It is important to understand that the options here do not reflect the views of any one political party or organization. It is your job to sort through the three options presented, deliberate with your peers on the strengths and challenges of each, think about your own concerns and values, and then frame an “Option 4” that reflects your views.

As you develop your own option for current U.S. nuclear policy, think about the following questions:

- What are nuclear weapons?
- How do they differ from other weapons?
- What is the history of nuclear weapons?
- Who has them now and how many are there?
- Do they make the world safer or less safe?
- What U.S. interests are at stake in this issue?
- What should our long-term goals be concerning nuclear weapons?
- What steps should the United States take in the near term?
- What values are important to you?
- What are the strengths of your option? What are the arguments against it?

Finally, you are encouraged to participate in an online ballot on this subject. “Nuclear Weapons Policy: What do you think?” is available at www.choices.edu/resources/ballots.php.

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This material is excerpted from *The Challenge of Nuclear Weapons*, a one-week curriculum unit developed by the Choices Program. A full description of this unit is available online from Resources on the Choices Program web site — www.choices.edu.

Option 1: Eliminate Nuclear Weapons Now

Today, nuclear weapons are the world's greatest threat. We have lived with the danger of nuclear weapons hanging over our heads for more than sixty years. Though they have only been used during wartime twice, we have come too close to nuclear war too often. Today, tens of thousands of nuclear weapons stand at the ready, many on hair trigger alert, threatening the lives of hundreds of millions of people and quite possibly the future of civilization itself. As long as imperfect human beings are in charge of nuclear weapons, the continued existence of these weapons offers too many possibilities for accident or miscalculation. These weapons make us less, not more, secure.

Lack of cooperation among nations worsens the problem of nuclear weapons. We should begin a coordinated diplomatic effort to reduce the risks of nuclear weapons associated with the leftover Cold War arsenals, terrorism, and proliferation. We should work with other nations to completely eliminate nuclear weapons. As the nation with the world's most powerful nuclear arsenal, we need to take the lead. As a first step, we should unilaterally eliminate all but five hundred of our own nuclear weapons. This step will put us on a more even playing field with other nuclear powers, and demonstrate immediately to the rest of the world that we are prepared to stand down from the nuclear brink. The resulting increase in trust and cooperation among nations will make it possible to engage in multilateral negotiations focused on the complete elimination of nuclear weapons.

Option 1 is based on the following beliefs

- The biggest problems we face today are global problems, and they can only be solved through global cooperation. Trying to deal with the challenge of nuclear weapons without the involvement of all nations will be impossible.
- Deterrence may work sometimes, but on balance it is too dangerous and largely inappropriate to the post-Cold War security environment. We cannot afford to continue to gamble with our safety. We will not be free of the dangers of nuclear weapons until they are completely abolished.
- It is immoral to threaten the lives of hundreds of millions, even if the reason given is to preserve peace.
- Our possession of nuclear weapons makes other nations anxious. Nuclear weapons do not make us more secure by making others feel less so.

What should we do?

- We should announce that we will lead a multilateral campaign to completely abolish nuclear weapons.
- We should announce immediately that we are reducing our nuclear weapons to about five hundred in order to jump-start serious discussions leading to the elimination of nuclear weapons.
- We should take all of our nuclear weapons off hair-trigger alert to reduce the risk of inadvertent use, and encourage all other nuclear states to do the same.
- We should discontinue all work on the National Missile Defense. This program is not only expensive and unfeasible; it communicates to the world that the United States intends to make nuclear war winnable.
- We should increase our funding of programs around the world to dismantle existing weapons and convert weapons programs to peaceful purposes.

Arguments for Option 1

- Since **the United States possesses such overwhelming and increasingly technologically sophisticated** conventional forces, the only thing that can really threaten our fundamental security at home is nuclear weapons. Therefore, we should work to rid the world of them.
- The dangers posed by nuclear weapons are present today. Working only through already-established treaties and agreements will take too long. It is unlikely to produce meaningful reductions at the pace needed.
- Others will not be willing to negotiate the elimination of nuclear weapons unless we demonstrate that we are prepared to join them as equals in this process. Unilaterally reducing our arsenal to five hundred will indicate that we are serious.
- The United States does not need nuclear weapons, as it possesses adequate conventional alternatives to meet most military requirements.
- Five hundred nuclear weapons are more than enough to guarantee our safety while we negotiate with other countries.
- Reducing the number of nuclear weapons around the world will reduce the likelihood that terrorist groups will acquire them.
- International cooperation can do more to deter rogue states than acting on our own.
- Increasing international cooperation on nuclear weapons will pave the way for solving other global issues.

Arguments against Option 1

- Disarmament is not feasible. Nuclear weapons cannot be “uninvented”. If the whole world disarms, some rogue state may secretly build them. Then we would be left vulnerable.
- Deterrence works; nuclear weapons have played a critical role in guaranteeing our security and that of our allies for sixty years.
- Leaders have a moral responsibility to protect their citizens, and nuclear weapons provide that security.
- We can increase our security by supporting the important agreements found in current arms control treaties such as the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty (NPT), by ratifying the Comprehensive Test Ban Treaty (CTBT), and by carefully negotiating additional agreements; not by rashly disarming and hoping for the best.
- If the United States reduces its weapons stockpile to five hundred, we will be on equal footing with China, France, and the United Kingdom and well below that of Russia. The United States will lose its military advantage, and this will compromise our international standing not only on military matters but also on a range of other international issues.
- If we unilaterally reduce our weapons stock to five hundred we could be vulnerable to international blackmail. With so many nuclear weapons around the world, five hundred weapons may not be enough to deter an attack.
- History has shown that the United States cannot rely on international cooperation to guarantee our security. Rather, we need to retain control over our weapons to deter attacks against us.

Option 2: Rely on Arms Control

The world is an unstable and dangerous place. Rogue states are working to build or acquire nuclear weapons. Terrorist networks are looking for opportunities to acquire these and other weapons of mass destruction. The world's huge stockpiles of nuclear weapons, a remnant of the Cold War, increase the risk of theft, proliferation, and even intentional use. We must strengthen arms control treaties in order to reduce the risks posed by the thousands of nuclear weapons around the world, many on hair-trigger alert. However, we can not eliminate nuclear weapons completely. It is reasonable and prudent to maintain some nuclear weapons in order to preserve our ability to deter a nuclear attack against us.

We must cooperate with the current nuclear powers to reduce the world's nuclear arsenals to minimal levels. This will require using the mechanisms already in place—international arms control agreements—to reduce the number of weapons incrementally. This process must be systematic and methodical. Arms control treaties should focus on reducing the risks associated with the leftover Cold War arsenals and on stopping proliferation to unfriendly states and non-state actors. We must offer our technology and security expertise to other nuclear states to help them safeguard their weapons from theft or misuse. Only a small number of nuclear weapons should remain and they should be designed only to deter others from breaking out of arms agreements.

Option 2 is based on the following beliefs

- Nuclear weapons prevented the Cold War from becoming a hot war. Although we must never use them, nuclear weapons retain their ability to deter attacks by other nuclear states. We must keep a few in order to maintain that deterrent.
- Thousands of nuclear weapons are no longer necessary. We must begin to reduce carefully their role in our national security.
- Nuclear weapons should ultimately be reduced to very low numbers, perhaps a thousand world-wide. The safest way to dismantle the current weapons stockpile is to work with international agreements and systems already in place.
- Carefully negotiated international arms control agreements are the best way to prevent the theft and proliferation of nuclear weapons.
- The United States set an important example. Other states make their nuclear weapons policy based on what we do with our nuclear weapons.

What should we do?

- We should lead an international diplomatic effort to strengthen the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty (NPT), including increasing the monitoring capacity of the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA).
- We and the international community should use everything at our disposal to bring states that are not parties to the NPT into compliance with its controls.
- We should drop our objections to the Comprehensive Test Ban Treaty (CTBT) and ratify it immediately.
- We should reactivate the Anti-Ballistic Missile (ABM) treaty with Russia. This would mean abandoning the unworkable National Missile Defense program.
- We should abandon any plans to develop “bunker-buster” nukes and mini nukes for use during a limited war.
- We should seek to increase cooperation among (and funding for) international law enforcement and intelligence services to identify and secure all potential sources of nuclear materials.

Arguments for Option 2

- International arms agreements play an important role in controlling the risks posed by nuclear weapons
- Reducing the number of nuclear weapons reduces the risk they pose to humanity and the planet.
- Other states make policy on nuclear weapons in the context of what the United States does. We serve as an important example to others.
- Deterrence should be preserved, but it does not require large numbers. If we can reduce the overall number and the type of nuclear weapons in existence, then it will only take a small number to deter the possibility of others using them.
- The only way to deal with terrorism is through the cooperation of states to control their nuclear materials. This is most effectively done through international agreements.
- Nuclear weapons are expensive to maintain. We do not need to spend hundreds of billions of dollars to maintain thousands of weapons we hope never to use when we can get by with far fewer.
- Rogue states like North Korea can be best contained through the diplomatic efforts of the nuclear powers. Even a minimal nuclear force would be sufficient to deter a small country like North Korea from using nuclear weapons against the US or its friends and allies.
- International agreements like the NPT and the CTBT are already in place. Renewed U.S. support of such agreements is important to meeting the challenges of nuclear weapons.

Arguments against Option 2

- In the short term, arms control agreements do nothing to protect us from terrorist groups. We need to retain our ability to strike against terrorist groups with small nuclear weapons.
- We do not have enough time to rely on a slow process of negotiating international arms control agreements to solve the immediate challenges of nuclear weapons.
- It is immoral to continue to threaten millions of people with nuclear weapons.
- The potential effects of nuclear weapons are so devastating that relying on the risky theory of deterrence is irresponsible.
- Until the United States asserts its moral leadership by demonstrating its commitment to disarmament, other nations will remain uncommitted to fulfilling treaty obligations.
- History has shown that relying on international agreements and cooperation for security is naive and dangerous. Keeping independent control of our nuclear arsenals is the best deterrent against attack.
- The ABM treaty is outdated and prevents us from developing an effective National Missile Defense, which we need to protect ourselves from smaller nuclear attacks.
- It would be dangerous to depend upon nuclear weapons (no matter how few) for deterrence and yet not modernize and test them regularly.

Option 3: Keep Nuclear Weapons as an Essential Part of U.S. Security

Nuclear weapons are critical to the security of the United States. Our nuclear weapons stockpile prevented the Soviet Union from overrunning Europe after the Second World War and protected us from the Soviet goal of worldwide domination. Today, our weapons remind aspiring powers like China and older nuclear powers like Russia that the United States is the world's leading military power and serve as a check on other nations' ambitions. No rational leader of a country would dare to threaten the United States. We must not let any irrational nuclear phobias influence us—nuclear weapons make conflict less likely.

But deterrence is no longer enough. Not all states are rational. In addition, in today's world we must also protect against terrorists. In this environment the threat of nuclear terrorism—whether carried out by rogue states or terrorist groups—is very real. We must preserve our right and our ability to attack before we are attacked. This might even include developing small nuclear weapons that could strike at hidden terrorist bases or rogue states producing illicit weapons that could be used against us.

Option 3 is based on the following beliefs

- Nuclear weapons have successfully protected the United States for sixty years. They remain critical to our defense.
- Proliferation of nuclear weapons is inevitable and cannot be managed or stopped by international agreements.
- We cannot afford to turn a blind eye to the dangers posed by rogue states and terrorist networks. We have a right, and a moral responsibility, to protect ourselves from the threats they pose before such threats materialize against us.
- Maintaining a credible stockpile of modern and reliable nuclear weapons that could be used does not increase the likelihood of full-scale nuclear war; on the contrary, it decreases it.
- The risk of accidental use is lower than critics claim. And we can develop our National Missile Defense to address this danger.

What should we do?

- We should modernize our nuclear weapons stockpiles. This includes developing and testing weapons to be sure that they work.
- We should develop a range of “bunker busters” and “mini” nuclear weapons that are capable of destroying deeply buried WMD facilities or striking at hidden terrorist bases.
- We should continue to develop a National Missile Defense (NMD) to protect us from smaller attacks.
- We should recognize that nuclear proliferation is inevitable and work to see that it is managed carefully.
- We should keep all of our nuclear options open, including the possibility of preemptive strikes to protect the United States.

Arguments for Option 3

- Nuclear weapons guarantee our security by discouraging others from risky military adventures against us.
- Nuclear weapons cannot be “uninvented,” and total nuclear disarmament, even if it was a good idea, is not feasible. Therefore, we should remain the strongest in nuclear weapons.
- U.S. nuclear policy does not influence the decisions of other nations on this issue. They will make their own decisions.
- As a last resort, we may need to use nuclear weapons to protect the United States. To do this, we may need to update our nuclear arsenal. We need nuclear weapons that are appropriate to the job, whether it is small, precise weapons to strike hidden terrorist bases or large “bunker busters” that can destroy hardened sites.
- Nuclear weapons make the behavior of states more predictable and encourage international stability.
- Maintaining a deterrent capability without nuclear weapons would be financially impossible because of the costs of developing so many equally powerful conventional weapons.

Arguments against Option 3

- Nuclear weapons in the hands of more states makes the world more dangerous and unpredictable.
- By reducing the number of nuclear weapons that could be bought or stolen we would reduce the risk of nuclear terrorism. New nuclear states would increase this risk.
- We were lucky to avoid nuclear war during the Cuban missile crisis. Rationality did not save us; it was luck.
- Nuclear weapons are a dangerous gamble. Deterrence will not work against terrorist, and it is also impossible to predict what an irrational and cornered political or military leader with nuclear weapons might do.
- International treaties about weapons, while imperfect, provide a means for cooperating and solving problems together with other states.
- Testing and developing new nuclear weapons will only heighten the anxiety of other states, thus increasing international instability.
- It is immoral to continue to threaten millions of people with nuclear weapons.