

By Jon Letman

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President Donald Trump attends a signing ceremony at Joint Base Andrews, in Maryland, United States on December 20, 2019. Yasin Ozturk / Anadolu Agency via Getty Images

Spending by the world's nine nuclear nations climbed to nearly \$73 billion in 2019, nearly half of it by the United States alone. At the same time, the Trump administration has prioritized nuclear weapons in its defense budget while abandoning nuclear treaties, fumbling negotiations and confounding allies. The administration's lack of coherent goals, strategies or policies have increased nuclear dangers, leaving the U.S. "blundering toward nuclear chaos with potentially disastrous consequences." Those are the findings of two separate reports published in May that examine nuclear spending and strategy under Trump.

The findings of the reports lay bare the soaring costs and dangers of the Trump administration's

pursuit of more [nuclear pits](#) ; the fast tracking of a new generation of [intercontinental ballistic missiles](#) ; and the deployment of new, low-yield submarine-launched nuclear weapons. In May, *The Washington Post* [reported](#) that Trump officials are in ongoing discussions about resuming explosive [nuclear weapons testing](#).

The first report, titled “ [Enough is Enough: Global Nuclear Weapons Spending](#) 2019,” published by the International Campaign to Abolish Nuclear Weapons (ICAN), is a densely-packed 12-page snapshot of how the world’s nuclear-armed nations collectively spent \$72.9 billion on nuclear weapons last year, an increase of more than \$7 billion over 2018. That worked out to almost \$200 million *per day* in 2019.

Among the nine nations that collectively (but very unevenly) possess over [13,000 nuclear weapons](#) , in 2019 four countries (Russia, China, France and India) increased nuclear spending modestly, three remained flat (the U.K., North Korea and Israel), and one cut spending slightly (Pakistan). Only the United States sharply increased nuclear expenditures over the previous year, from \$29.6 billion to \$35.4 billion.

According to Alicia Sanders-Zakre, ICAN policy and research coordinator and lead author of the report, the modernization of existing weapons and the expansion of arsenals is likely to drive further increases on nuclear spending in coming years.

Drawing primarily on Department of Defense and the National Nuclear Security Administration figures, the report found that U.S. nuclear spending made up about 5 percent of the United States’ total military spending last year.

Sanders-Zakre told *Truthout* that while figures are based largely on government budget documents, the [SIPRI Military Expenditure Database](#) , and other estimates from regional scholarly work on local defense spending, the report does not include [environmental remediation](#)

costs or

[compensatory assistance programs](#)

for victims of nuclear weapons use and testing. Reporting and documenting those costs is often uneven and frequently lacks transparency. The true total costs of nuclear weapons, Sanders-Zakre noted, is in fact much higher than the numbers cited in the report.

The Trump administration has prioritized nuclear weapons in its defense budget while abandoning nuclear treaties.

In response to [those who argue](#) that nuclear weapons “don’t cost that much” because they account for a relatively small fraction of overall defense spending, Sanders-Zakre calculated that total nuclear spending among the U.S., France and U.K. in a single year could cover all their respective shortfalls in “ICU beds, annual salaries for doctors and nurses, and ventilators ... and [they would] still have just enormous amounts of money left over.”

And to U.S. allies who, like NATO Secretary General [Jens Stoltenberg](#), argue the case for keeping American nuclear weapons on [European soil](#)

, Sanders-Zakre said that the citizens of nations living under the U.S. nuclear umbrella should be asked if they want to be used to justify U.S. nuclear weapons. Many, she says, would reject those weapons, as was

[illustrated recently](#)

by a leader of Germany’s Social Democratic party, who called for U.S. nuclear weapons to be removed from Germany.

“Blundering Toward Nuclear Chaos”

A second report, “[Blundering Toward Nuclear Chaos: The Trump Administration After Three Years](#),” published by the American Nuclear Policy Initiative (ANPI), an independent project of [Global Zero](#), takes a sweeping look at how the U.S. is navigating the complex nuclear landscape under the undisciplined and unpredictable rule of Donald Trump.

Calling for broad changes, the report’s authors present a disturbing triptych of instability,

inexperience and incompetence, making a powerful case for the urgent need to correct and redirect the U.S.'s approach to nuclear weapons policy.

Beginning with U.S.-Russian relations, and continuing with critiques of Trump's approach to Iran, North Korea, China, modernization, nonproliferation and other critical nuclear matters, the report is a sober, even-tempered assessment of an administration led by a temperamental bull in a nuclear china shop.

The report describes "growing nuclear instability and the accelerating arms race between Russia and the United States" as among the "most pressing and consequential" nuclear challenges facing the U.S. today.

Largely completed before January 2020, when the U.S. and Iran came dangerously close to an all-out war, and with the spread of the coronavirus on its heels, the authors make it clear that the Trump administration was ill-equipped to navigate the nuclear weapons landscape, even before a global pandemic and subsequent economic freefall.

The commitments or capabilities that are demonstrated by the administration, the report notes, are being undermined by the president's own inability to conduct foreign policy in a manner consistent with international norms or the expectations of U.S. allies.

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In its relations with Iran and North Korea, the administration has taken strikingly different approaches — "maximum pressure" and confrontation with Iran and, in the case of North Korea, threats to "totally destroy" the country followed by highly choreographed summits and Trump's declaration that "there is no longer a nuclear threat" from the North. In both cases, however, Trump's approach has failed to produce concrete steps toward denuclearization.

The report's authors note that Trump takes pride in rejecting traditional approaches to domestic and foreign policy challenges, resulting in increased tension between the administration and

policy makers who have invested decades in protecting U.S. interests.

The authors also closely examine how Trump has played a disruptive — even destructive — role in dismantling international agreements and nuclear treaties, most notably the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action or Iran nuclear deal, the Intermediate-Range Nuclear Forces Treaty, while acting in a manner that runs counter to arms control and nonproliferation.

The report explains why the U.S. is likely to continue rejecting Russian overtures to extend the last major U.S.-Russia bilateral nuclear agreement, the [New START Treaty](#), set to expire in February 2021. The Trump administration insists the treaty should be renegotiated to include China, which has just over 300 nuclear weapons (compared with Russia and the U.S., which have an [estimate](#) 6,370
[d](#) and 5,800 respectively).

Trump's rejection of extending New START appears all but certain, especially following the recent announcement by the Trump administration that it was planning to abandon the nearly three-decade old [Open Skies Treaty](#). The treaty allows 34 party nations to carry out reconnaissance flights in the interest of transparency and the prevention of misunderstanding that could lead to war.

"This is a reckless decision and more evidence that the Trump administration seems incapable of fixing or building anything. They only know how to tear things down," Alexandra Bell, a senior policy analyst with the [Center for Arms Control and Non-Proliferation](#) and co-author of the ANPI report told *Truthout*
. "President Trump is being steered into a legacy of destruction."

Bell, who wrote the report's chapter on nonproliferation and disarmament said, "We've been lucky enough to avoid [nuclear war] for the last 75 years but unfortunately, the law of odds is such that eventually this is going to happen unless we take steps to reduce and eventually eliminated the weapons themselves and there's just no way of getting around that."

This comes as Trump has vowed to [cut financial support](#) for the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention and [stop funding](#) for

the World Health Organization, even as Trump's special presidential envoy for arms control recently said the U.S. was prepared to "[spend China and Russian into oblivion](#)" in order to win a new arms race.

Under Trump, nuclear spending and tensions are sharply increasing, but U.S. allies are anxious and uncertain and adversaries are antagonized. At a time when more than 100,000 Americans have been killed by a virus that can't be stopped with a bomb, both the ICAN and ANPI reports illustrate how Trump's unrestrained embrace of nuclear weapons is not making a U.S. that is safer, only a U.S. that is alone.

"We're currently at a crossroads," Bell said. "The next president of the United States is going to have to decide: Do we want to live in a world where the number of nuclear weapons is continuing to go down, or one in which it's starting to go back up again?"

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