

By Sara Sirota

From [The Intercept](#) | Original Article

With the Russian invasion of Ukraine, prospects for U.S. nuclear disarmament look bleak. The Biden administration was already cutting corners on its policy.

As the week began, nonproliferation advocates [weren't optimistic](#) that President Joe Biden would stand by [his early commitments](#)

to “reduce the role of nuclear weapons in our national security strategy.” He might reverse former President Donald Trump’s decisions to pursue a nuclear-armed, sea-launched cruise missile or to retain the B83 gravity bomb, the most destructive weapon in the U.S. nuclear arsenal, they thought. He might roll back Trump’s policy

[allowing a nuclear response](#)

to “significant non-nuclear strategic attacks” or even consider a coveted “no first use” policy that Biden had shown interest in as vice president. But prospects that he would do the heavier lifting and

[halt Northrop Grumman's contract](#)

to replace the intercontinental ballistic missile system — considered one of the most dangerous and unnecessary weapons in the nuclear arsenal — were practically nonexistent. Combined with multiple other weapons programs, the brand-new ICBM system puts the U.S. in its largest nuclear modernization effort since the Cold War.

Now that Russia has invaded Ukraine in what could amount to the worst conflict in Europe since World War II, the prognosis looks even more grim, and the urgency for prudence much greater. Russia is armed with a [trove of nuclear weapons](#), spreading fear to concerned observers about the prospect of an escalation involving the most destructive arms on the planet. During a televised address Wednesday night, Russian President Vladimir Putin issued a [stark warning](#) that anyone who interferes “will face consequences greater than any you have faced in history” — which some experts have interpreted as a reference to nuclear weapons. Allen Hester of the Friends Committee on National Legislation told The Intercept on Thursday that Russia is “very much using their nuclear arsenal as a shield to pursue conventional warfare in the region,” adding that it’s crucial nevertheless to keep the lines of communication open.

There will now likely be heightened pressure on Biden, who is yet to approve his final nuclear weapons strategy, to continue Trump's expansionist course. Stephen Young of the Union of Concerned Scientists warned that hawks in the administration will try to convince Biden to keep the cruise missile and gravity bomb that his predecessor endorsed. "People will see it, they will claim it's a sign of weakness if the U.S. cancels anything right now," he told *The Intercept*. Hester said Biden may also be less willing to adopt a "no first use" policy, especially if fearful European allies, who've already [lobbied against it](#), urge Biden again not to make major reforms. And, in what Hester described as a worst-case scenario, the president could decide to increase spending on cyber operations and other non-nuclear capabilities, then frame the relative change as a reduction in nuclear weapon reliance without cutting the arsenal at all.

"If Biden issues the NPR the Pentagon wrote, he will not just be accepting obsolete Cold War doctrines and weapons, he will be blessing them."

Biden will weigh his options as he considers the draft Nuclear Posture Review that, prior to the crisis in Ukraine, was expected early this year. The NPR is a public document that each president since Bill Clinton has released to declare their policy on nuclear weapons. According to Hester, the draft is currently sitting on the president's desk awaiting approval and any changes that he may deem necessary. Young said Defense Department officials have told him that the strategy's rollout will be delayed until after the crisis in Ukraine settles. The White House and Pentagon did not reply to requests for comment.

Nuclear policy expert Joe Cirincione of the Quincy Institute for Responsible Statecraft told *The Intercept* that the war on Ukraine, and Americans' tendency to immediately react by "bringing down the hammer," shows why Biden should pull back his NPR and consider a more restrained approach. He especially warned about the administration repackaging the same old maximalist policies under new lingo like "[integrated deterrence](#)" that can "create a slipper[y] slope where conventional conflict can escalate quickly and seamlessly to cyber war and nuclear war."

"It is completely inadequate for the task ahead of us," Cirincione said of the draft review, arguing: "If Biden issues the NPR the Pentagon wrote, he will not just be accepting obsolete Cold War doctrines and weapons, he will be blessing them. All his officials will be required to embrace these weapons and strategies as the Democratic view. Members of Congress will be kneecapped, unable to oppose these new weapons no matter what the cost."

Skeptics of nuclear weapons are already at a disadvantage. In 2010, after President Barack Obama successfully negotiated the New Strategic Arms Reduction Treaty to limit the number of

deployed ICBMs and other weapons, disarmament activists hoped that he would continue his [2009 pledge](#) “to seek the peace and the security of a world without nuclear weapons.” But according to Cirincione, Obama faced so much wrath from Republicans and the nuclear-industrial complex, as well as a demanding Putin, that he turned away from plans to reduce arms further and allowed research for a new ICBM program, known as the Ground Based Strategic Deterrent, to proceed. The weapon, whose development was greenlighted in the final months of Trump's presidency, is slated to cost \$264 billion through 2075 and begin replacing the current system in the late 2020s.

Similar forces have come for Biden. Last year, for example, the White House had selected Leonor Tomero, a longtime congressional staffer known for questioning excessive weapons buildup, to oversee the NPR, leading to a [revolt](#) by the defense establishment. In the Senate, Nebraska Republican Deb Fischer [reportedly threatened](#) to obstruct confirmations of nominees if Tomero stayed. The Department of Defense eliminated her position in September, calling the move a reorganization.

Another impediment to restraint [arises from claims](#) that nuclear weapon programs result in jobs and economic development in some lawmakers' home states. Sen. Jon Tester, D-Mont., who has outsized influence over the military budget as chair of the Appropriations Committee's defense panel, has [reiterated his support](#) for the new ICBM system, which will partially be based in Montana. (Nonproliferation advocates like Global Zero's Emma Claire Foley [argue](#) that the public could be better served by directing the new weapon's funds toward programs like Medicare expansion.)

And the two most powerful Republicans on the Senate and House Armed Services committees — Sen. James Inhofe, R-Okla., and Rep. Mike Rogers, R-Ala. — have sought to shut down assessment of whether the new weapon system is necessary. Last month the two [criticized the Defense Department](#) for contracting with the Carnegie Endowment for International Peace to assess whether the current ICBM system, known as the Minuteman III, could remain viable as an alternative to its replacement. Rogers' spokesperson Justine Sanders told Bloomberg that the review was redundant because the Obama administration had already examined other options, a common argument that proponents of the Ground Based Strategic Deterrent use. But that prior assessment, which is classified, was likely grounded in assumptions that the size of the force and deterrence needs would not change, Matt Korda of the Federation of American Scientists told The Intercept.

The contract began with the premise that the U.S. would continue to have an ICBM force rather than consider the possibility of eliminating the missiles, James Acton, co-director of Carnegie's nuclear policy program, told The Intercept. ICBMs carry "inherent risks in a crisis in the sense that because [leaders] have a 'use them or lose them' mentality around these weapons, because they're framed as sitting ducks, essentially, in the event of a nuclear war, the pressure on the president to use them in a crisis is very high," Hester explained.

The weapons also serve as "nuclear sponges," meaning that "they're there to absorb the enemy's nuclear missiles and sacrifice those communities in the Midwest who house these missiles in the name of saving ... larger-population coastal cities," he added.

"They're there to absorb the enemy's nuclear missiles and sacrifice those communities in the Midwest who house these missiles in the name of saving ... larger-population coastal cities."

Despite resistance from Inhofe and Rogers, the Carnegie study was nowhere near the thorough technical evaluation [sought by](#) Sen. Elizabeth Warren, D-Mass., and 19 other Democratic lawmakers last year. According to Acton, it was never meant to be: "Our study was entirely unclassified, and precisely because the NPR is coming out relatively soon, it was also a fairly short study. So our study was not, could not be, it was never intended to be a detailed, technically informed feasibility assessment of different options."

Politico [reported last month](#) that the Biden administration decided to ignore the 20 Democrats' request for an in-depth analysis of whether the Minuteman III could continue serving into the future. The Intercept has also learned that the Pentagon appears to have used a bogus excuse to justify why it didn't seek out such an evaluation.

During one of Carnegie's virtual workshops, held January 6, a Biden political appointee claimed that JASON, the Pentagon's go-to independent scientific advisory group, had neither the time nor contracting mechanism to conduct the requested analysis, attendee Daryl Kimball, executive director of the Arms Control Association, told The Intercept. He said the appointee, Deputy Assistant Secretary of Defense for Countering Weapons of Mass Destruction Richard Johnson, was speaking from prepared remarks — suggesting that the justification came from more senior policymakers. The Defense Department declined to comment on Johnson's remarks.

An email sent after the workshop and shared with The Intercept suggests that Johnson's claim was untrue. According to the email, his comments prompted another attendee to email Ellen Williams, the chair of JASON and a physics professor at the University of Maryland, to ask whether the group had the capacity to conduct the evaluation. Williams replied that JASON indeed had the contracting means in place. The name of the original sender was redacted, but Kimball referred to him as a former member of the Obama administration.

“The Nuclear Posture Review, by going ahead with the ICBM without doing studies, contributes to this sort of mindless nuclear buildup without thoughts about where it leads.”

“JASON does and has had mechanisms to contract with DoD – for instance we did studies for DOD [acquisition and sustainment office] both of the last two summers, and are now discussing topics for next summer with DOD [research and engineering office],” Williams wrote in her reply. “I don't recall any conversation with them about a study, and don't know when or whether they might have been in touch with us.” She did not respond to a request for comment from The Intercept.

Gordon Long, JASON program office director at the Mitre Corp., which manages the group, declined to say whether the organization discussed the possibility of an ICBM review with the Pentagon. However, he told The Intercept in an email that Mitre has a contract with the Office of the Under Secretary of Defense to provide JASON with logistical support that the Pentagon can use to order studies.

The absence of the in-depth technical assessment calls into question the completion of the draft nuclear strategy, which was already concerning to nonproliferation experts. “The Nuclear Posture Review, by going ahead with the ICBM without doing studies, contributes to this sort of mindless nuclear buildup without thoughts about where it leads,” Cirincione said. “It's not balanced by an equally strong, you might say, disarmament plan that talks about how we get out of this — and without that, you're basically throwing nuclear fuel on the fire.”