

# President Trump Flunks Nuclear 101

In Reuters Interview

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*President Donald Trump in [an interview with Reuters today](#) demonstrated an astounding lack of knowledge about basic nuclear weapons issues.*

*[According to Reuters](#) Trump said he wanted to build up the US nuclear arsenal to ensure it is at the “top of the pack.” He said the United States has “fallen behind on nuclear weapons capacity.”*

Building up the US nuclear arsenal would be an unnecessary, unaffordable, and a counterproductive move. It is unnecessary because the US military already has more nuclear weapons than it needs to meet US national and international security commitments. It would be unaffordable because the Pentagon will have problems paying for the nuclear modernization program initiated by the Obama administration. And it is counterproductive because it would further fuel nuclear buildups in other nuclear weapon states.



The claim that the US has “fallen behind on its nuclear weapons capacity” is also wrong; the US has the nuclear weapons capability it needs to meet its national and international security commitments. All nuclear-armed states have different nuclear weapons capacities depending on their individual needs. Nuclear planning is not a race but a strategy.

In terms of capacity, the United States is already at the “top of the pack” with highly capable nuclear forces that are backed up by overwhelming conventional forces. [See here](#) how the US nuclear arsenal compares with other nuclear-armed states.

Trump also called the New START Treaty “a one-sided deal” and a “bad deal.” Once again he is wrong. The treaty has equal limits for both the United States and Russia: by February 2018, neither side can have more than 1,550 warheads on 700 deployed launchers and no more than 800 total deployed and non-deployed launchers.

Next month the new bi-annual aggregate data set will be published; the previous one from September 2016 showed Russia with 1,796 warheads on 508 launchers compared with the United States with 1,367 warheads on 681 launchers.

Some people got very excited about that saying the larger number of Russian deployed warheads somehow gave Russia an advantage and showed they didn’t intend to comply with the treaty. Warheads can be moved on and off launchers relatively quickly; the important number is the number of launchers where the US was counted with 173 more

than Russia.

Indeed, [according to the Pentagon and Intelligence Community](#), Russia “would not be able to achieve a militarily significant advantage *by any plausible expansion of its strategic nuclear forces, even in a cheating or breakout scenario under the New START Treaty...*” (Emphasis added.)

But nitpicking about numbers misses the bigger point: the New START treaty was signed with overwhelming support from the US military, Congress, former officials, and experts because the treaty caps the nuclear forces of both countries and continues an important on-site verification system and data exchange.

President Trump may have been briefed by the Pentagon on his role in the nuclear war plan. But his latest interview with *Reuters* shows that he urgently needs to be briefed on the status of US nuclear forces, other nuclear-armed states, and the basics of the arms control treaties the United States has signed. But that briefing needs to be done outside the White House bubble and include bi-partisan and independent input. Otherwise all indications are that President Trump will be extraordinarily poorly equipped to make informed decisions about the nuclear policy.

Additional resources:

- [Status of World Nuclear Forces](#)
- [Latest New START Treaty data](#)

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