

Study: Blow up the missiles, stick with subs

By: Brendan Bordelon – September 25, 2013

A new study by a libertarian think tank takes the axe to America's nuclear triad, claiming the Pentagon could save \$20 billion each year by cancelling its bomber and land-based missile programs while sticking with its submarine-based deterrent.

Created during the Eisenhower administration, the triad first stitched together bomber, missile and submarine nuclear delivery systems to ensure that America's atomic arsenal would survive a preemptive Soviet attack.

But on Tuesday, Cato Institute published a [report](#) that labels the nuclear triad a redundant relic of the Cold War, claiming it does little to address the threats now facing the United States.

"The arguments that justify an oversized U.S. arsenal and its triad of delivery systems revolve around a set of myths inherited from early Cold War politics," the study's authors write.

"U.S. power today makes the case for the triad more dubious," they continue. "No U.S. adversary has the capability to destroy all U.S. ballistic submarines, let alone all three legs, and there would be time to adjust if that changed."

"A submarine-based monad, along with conventional capability, can provide all the deterrence we need, and save roughly \$20 billion dollars a year," the scholars conclude.

While acknowledging that political realities make the triad's elimination unlikely, the researchers believe that the sequester, which threatens to cut \$52 billion from the DoD's 2014 budget, may force the Pentagon to rethink maintaining three separate nuclear delivery systems.

"Austerity and the declining utility of nuclear weapons in U.S. wars create a possibility that military leaders might agree to sacrifice a triad leg to preserve other capabilities," they write. "Policymakers should exploit that circumstance to improve strategic debate."

Other defense scholars, however, believe the Cato Institute's study is strategically short-sighted. "I actually think the triad is going to become more important in the next 20 years than it has been in the last 20," said Michael Auslin, a researcher at the conservative American Enterprise Institute, in an interview with The Daily Caller News Foundation.

"We've been living in a post-Cold War hiatus for 20 years," he continued, "and now we're heading into a much more unstable and contested future."

Auslin said that while current nuclear powers like Russia are updating their arsenals, and aspiring ones like Iran are racing towards the bomb, the United States cannot afford to sit on its hands.

“I’m not saying there’s a pure competitor to the United States right now,” he admitted, “but we don’t live in a static world.”

Although he agreed with Cato researchers that the submarine force, with its ability to hide from detection and creep right up against enemy coastlines, may be the most [efficient](#) leg of the triad, Auslin argued it is by no means foolproof.

“If you go down to one leg of the triad — doesn’t matter which one but let’s say it’s the submarines — you have absolutely no assurance that you won’t wake up in 15 or 20 years and somebody has figured out that ‘magic key,’” Auslin said.

“They can make the oceans transparent instead of opaque, they can figure out what is the one glitch with our submarines,” he continued. “We don’t know what it is, but that’s the reason you have redundancy and complexity.”

“Taken together, what the triad does is make it almost impossible for any adversary to even consider that they can come up with the ‘magic key’ to eliminating America’s nuclear capabilities,” he finished.