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A Test for U.S. Nuclear Weapons: Can They Beat the Sequester?

By: Sandra I. Erwin – November 24, 2013

As far as nuclear weapons are concerned, politics trumps the Budget Control Act.

While the U.S. military faces budget cuts of nearly $500 billion over the next decade, spending on nuclear weapons and delivery systems is expected to soar, according to analysts.

Even though the United States plans to reduce the number of deployed nuclear warheads, as per the terms of the new Strategic Arms Reduction Treaty, it intends to modernize land-based intercontinental ballistic missiles, and build new submarines and long-range bombers to deliver nuclear weapons. The Obama administration also is seeking funds to update existing warheads and modernize tactical nuclear weapons that currently are stored in Europe.

These programs collectively could cost hundreds of billions of dollars, and although Congress appears to be standing firm on sequester — across the board spending cuts for all federal agencies — nuclear weapons are likely to be spared, experts said.

“It's not a budget issue, it's a political issue,” said Jack Mayer, executive vice president of Booz Allen Hamilton. “Nuclear forces are in the political realm more than anything else,” he said at a Brookings Institution forum. Because the size of the nuclear arsenal is governed by treaties, he said, these weapons are more sequester-proof than conventional military systems.

“The growing cost to sustain the nuclear mission will force increasingly difficult tradeoffs between nuclear and conventional capabilities,” said Kingston Reif, nuclear weapons expert at the Center for Arms Control and Non-Proliferation.

Reif estimated that it will cost nearly $300 billion over the next 25 years to modernize U.S. nuclear weapon delivery systems which are known as the nuclear “triad” — ballistic missile submarines, long-range bombers and intercontinental ballistic missiles — and extend the life of five different warheads.

“While spending on nuclear weapons is slated to skyrocket, the military budget is scheduled to come crashing back to Earth,” he said. The Congressional Budget Office calculated the Defense Department could save $48 billion in the coming decade by reducing the number of ballistic missile submarines in the fleet from 12 to eight and delaying the long-range strike bomber program until the mid-2020s. “Pursuing

either or both of these options would still leave the United States with a devastating nuclear deterrent," Reif said. "It is not at all clear that such questions are even being asked within the national security establishment, let alone debated."

A study by the Cato Institute suggested a smaller arsenal deployed entirely on submarines would save roughly $20 billion annually while deterring attacks on the United States and its allies. A two-legged deterrence, as opposed to the current triad, Cato analysts contend, would make more sense financially but it is politically a tough sell. The triad, the study noted, grew from internal competition within the U.S. military services to meet the Soviet threat.

It remains to be seen whether the austerity measures that are bearing on every government agency will strike a blow on nuclear weapons programs. Fiscal hawks on Capitol Hill have insisted that the sequester stay in place for federal civilian and military programs, but they have drawn the line when it comes to nuclear weapons. The House version of the National Defense Authorization Act prohibits elimination of the nuclear triad and limits availability of funds for nuclear reductions. The bill also protects funding for the B61 tactical nuclear bomb life extension program, which is estimated to cost $11 billion.

Billions of Defense and Energy department dollars, and thousands of jobs are at stake in many states that are home to the nation's 450 ICBM silos. A Senate amendment to the NDAA — by lawmakers from states that are home to Air Force ICBM bases — would restrict the administration from shutting down any ICBM sites.

The new START Treaty, signed in 2010 by the United States and Russia, reduces the U.S. arsenal from 1,688 to 1,550 deployed warheads by 2017. During the Cold War, the United States deployed 10,000 warheads.

The conservative Heritage Foundation frequently blasts the administration for short-changing nuclear weapons programs. "Budget cuts undermine 21st-Century bomber, threaten nuclear triad," blared a recent op-ed. "While the administration promised to increase the funding for the U.S. decrepit nuclear weapons infrastructure, it has not followed through. … The U.S. nuclear triad continues to age. The United States is currently the only nuclear weapons state without a substantive nuclear weapons modernization program," said a Heritage paper. "The HASC NDAA takes prudent steps to halt this trend."

Supporters of nuclear modernization argue that delaying upgrades only add to future costs. "The cost of modernization can be carefully laid out and done in sequence," said Peter Huessy, president of GeoStrategic Analysis. "One of the reasons the entire triad and its supporting infrastructure needs to be refurbished now is that the so-called arms control community made every effort to block, delay and otherwise make more difficult and costly the very modernization programs for our strategic nuclear

triad they are now so concerned with."

Among the staunchest critics of the administration's plan to modernize nuclear forces is Sen. Dianne Feinstein, D-Calif., chairman of the Senate Select Committee on Intelligence.

"Since nuclear forces are larger than needed for current military missions, it is time to think more creatively about how to maintain a much smaller nuclear deterrent at an affordable cost," she said Nov. 13 at a conference on Capitol Hill.

Feinstein said she supports the president's proposed path to further reduce the deployed strategic stockpile to about 1,000 weapons. "However, these efforts are not designed to reduce the total size of the stockpile," she said. "Thousands of weapons remain part of the 'hedge.' For every deployed weapon, there will soon be four in the hedge, which means if 1,000 warheads are deployed, 4,000 will be available in a reserve capacity."

This year, the National Nuclear Security Administration rolled out an ambitious effort known as "3+2" — a 25-year plan to reduce warhead types from seven to five. "While I support reductions to the stockpile and the savings that come with it, the 3+2 plan requires spending tens of billions of dollars more on life extension programs as well as increasing technical risks such as design changes," Feinstein said. "The promise of the 3+2 plan was to provide a smaller stockpile in exchange for a larger investment. However, when the plan is examined, there is no decrease in the number of warheads," she said. "In addition, sequestration, shrinking budgets and NNSA's long history of cost overruns and schedule delays raise serious concerns about the agency's ability to execute this mission."

Work on life extension programs, she said, "could crowd out all other investments needed to assess the safety, security and reliability of the current stockpile and address aging infrastructure."

Feinstein said she is alarmed by the rising cost of the life extension of the B61 gravity bomb. "The program is unaffordable at $10 billion," she said. "The administration has said it is serious about making 'bold reductions' to our tactical nuclear weapons in Europe. That would mean reductions of the B61."

The administration proposed increased spending on the B61 program from $369 million in fiscal year 2013 to $537 million in 2014. The 2013 sequester sliced about $30 million, which will delay the program by six months. As a result, the overall cost is estimated to rise by $230 million.

"It's important that our elected officials realize the extent to which the costs of this program have spiraled out of control and that its current deployment to Europe represents an outdated Cold War strategy," said a report by the Project on Government Oversight, a watchdog group. "At the very least, our allies in Europe should be paying their fair share if they even want to keep these bombs at all."

But the odds that European nations will pick up the tab are slim to none, said Guy Roberts, former deputy assistant secretary general for weapons of mass destruction at the North Atlantic Treaty

Organization. "Europeans don't see a security threat," he said Nov. 21 at a Heritage Foundation forum. "It's part of the reason NATO defense budgets are in freefall," he said. U.S. concerns about Iran's nuclear weapons, he said, "don't reverberate much in Europe."

Air Force Chief of Staff Gen. Mark A. Welsh said future decisions on nuclear weapons spending should be part of a larger debate about deterrence and U.S. strategy. "If warheads come down, we'll have to take a serious look at the force structure of the triad. ... Maybe it does not make as much sense anymore," Welsh told reporters last week at a breakfast meeting in Washington.

"The whole nuclear deterrence strategy always evolves," Welsh said. "We need a clear picture of where the nation is going."

Welsh said he is a "believer" in the triad. All three legs, he said, "give us flexibility of response." But the cost of modernizing the infrastructure is "not small," he said. Future investments should be part of the policy discussion in the next round of arms-control talks, said Welsh. "It's a fair debate. ... And costs will be a factor whether we have sequester or not."