



Cato research proposes U.S. go to submarine-only nuclear delivery system

Research recommends cutting bombers and land-based missiles, saying submarines are more effective.

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The U.S. nuclear weapon triad system -- bombers, land-based intercontinental ballistic missiles and submarine-launched ballistic missiles -- wastes billions of dollars and could be streamlined to just one delivery system, according to research released Tuesday by the libertarian Cato Institute.

The research recommended cutting bombers and land-based missiles for nuclear weapons, saying submarines are more effective.

"This paper, I hope, reflects the kind of top to bottom review that is necessary," said Christopher Preble, vice president for defense and foreign policy studies at Cato.

Preble, Cato defense research fellow Benjamin Friedman and researcher Matt Fay of Temple University argue that nuclear weapons are essentially irrelevant in U.S. wars.

"Budgetary benefits and military use of nukes have declined," Friedman said. "I think the cause of that is that they [nukes] aren't used in the wars we actually fight."

He said most of the wars the U.S. wages are against weak states that have no nuclear capabilities.

"Nuking a bunch of people in a country that doesn't threaten the survival of the U.S. isn't morally acceptable so nobody thinks of that as a possibility," Friedman said.

The research said that submarines are more effective than bombers because bombers are vulnerable to sophisticated air defenses and interception while refueling but submarines can covertly approach enemy shores, making them much less vulnerable to attack.

"Submarines possess a capacity that would make even an aggressive adversary think twice," Fay said.

But Elbridge Colby of the Center for Naval Analyses argued that cutting the current triad down to one system would be "imprudent or outright dangerous."

"By getting rid of two legs of the triad they are prepared to buy a smaller insurance package," Colby said.

Hans Kristensen, director of the Nuclear Information Project, countered that submarines may be, in fact, more vulnerable to attacks, especially because they would potentially be up against countries like Russia and China, with land-based resources.

“There is something to think about here,” Kristensen said. “How is that force [submarines] going to interact?”

The Cato researchers stood by their solo system recommendation, saying it would be less expensive, saving about \$20 billion annually.

While they ultimately favor an abandonment of the air- and land-based legs of the triad, they are not nuclear abolitionists.

“We’re not going to move away from counterforce capabilities,” Friedman said. “We can’t.”