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Future Of Nuclear Arsenal Is Unclear

SUNDAY, MARCH 28, 2010

The general public knows very little about the U.S. nuclear arsenal. The nuclear weapons budget, including security and maintenance of the warheads, totals well into the billions. There are billions more tied up in the submarines, missiles, and aircraft tasked with delivering these weapons to targets. The public is also confused about the nature of these weapons, about the role that they play in deterrence, and about the prospects for further nuclear arms reductions.

At a Capitol Hill Briefing "Nuclear Weapons Spending and the Future of the Arsenal," Stephen I. Schwartz, editor of Nonproliferation Review at the James Martin Center for Nonproliferation Studies of the Monterey Institute of International Studies, and principal author of Nuclear Security Spending: Assessing Costs, Examining Priorities, shed some light on this issue and provided some concrete figures.

Simply putting together a comprehensive assessment of the amount we spend on nuclear weapons is difficult, he said, because nuclear weapons program expenses are spread across the budgets of multiple departments. There is no single nuclear weapons budget in existence. By going through the various programs, he found that, in 2008, the United States spent roughly \$52.8 billion on nuclear security — but this number is likely low, since it does not include intelligence and classified activities. Mr. Schwartz said he would like to see legislation requiring the administration to compile a single, consistent budget for all nuclear weapons-related programs, bringing more transparency to the spending. Congress would then have the opportunity to take a much broader look at the tremendous amount of money allocated to this area and make more informed decisions.

While Mr. Schwartz admitted there were inherent difficulties in producing such a study without inside access and classified documents, his study is instructive nonetheless as the only contemporary study of the true cost of nuclear security spending. It sets a model for what could become a required comprehensive accounting study.

Christopher Preble, director of foreign policy studies at the Cato Institute, mapped out the decision criteria we should use to downsize from our current, three-pronged nuclear strategy (the triad) to a two-pronged alternative (the dyad).

While the triad was defensible in the context of the Cold War, Mr. Preble said, at some point in the 20th Century it went from being prudent to questionable, and then to absurd. With the continuing decline of worldwide arsenals, we no longer need all three delivery systems for our nuclear warheads: missiles on submarines, B-2 and B-52 bombers, and intercontinental ballistic missiles on the continental United States. One of the three should be phased out and that decision should be based "not on parochial and political considerations but ultimately on the strategic merit of each system."

Cato Institute

A Special Message From The Publisher

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