

Nuclear Policies Clash in Defense Bills

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The Democratic-led Senate Armed Services Committee passed its version of the fiscal year 2012 defense authorization bill on June 16, setting up a tug-of-war over nuclear weapons policy with the Republican-led House of Representatives, which passed its version May 26. The House and Senate versions of the bill differ significantly on nuclear policy directives to the Obama administration, which has threatened to veto the House bill.

The White House on May 24 issued a Statement of Administration Policy on the House bill, objecting to sections that “impinge on the President’s authority to implement the New START Treaty and to set U.S. nuclear weapons policy.” In particular, the administration found that section 1055, which would limit the president’s ability to implement reductions under the New Strategic Arms Reduction Treaty, would “set onerous conditions” on the president’s ability to “retire, dismantle, or eliminate non-deployed nuclear weapons.” The conditions include the completion of new nuclear weapons production facilities, which is not expected until the mid-2020s. “The effect of this section would be to preclude dismantlement of weapons in excess of military needs,” the White House said.

The Senate committee bill would require the secretary of defense to submit reports on the “military effectiveness” of U.S. nuclear delivery systems and on the number of nuclear weapons in the “deployed and non-deployed stockpiles, including each category of non-deployed weapons.”

However, the bill would not set conditions for nuclear arsenal reductions.

No date has been set for the full Senate to vote on the bill. Sen. Jon Kyl (R-Ariz.) has said he may offer amendments to the bill that would mirror the House language more closely. To become law, the House and Senate defense authorization bills must be reconciled, and the resulting legislation must be passed by both chambers and signed by the president.

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