Time to Rethink and Reduce Nuclear Weapons Spending

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The supercommittee’s Nov. 21 failure to reach agreement on a deficit reduction plan has triggered deep, automatic reductions in future U.S. defense spending. At the same time, some in Congress are finally beginning to examine how much the United States plans to spend on nuclear weapons in the years ahead.

Through it all, one thing is clear: the changing security environment and increasing budget pressure mean that the United States can and should spend less on nuclear weapons than previously planned.

The automatic reductions, known as “sequestration,” will double the amount of money the Pentagon must cut from its projected budget growth, from about $450 billion to roughly $1 trillion, over the next decade. These cuts could get derailed before they take effect in 2013, but that outcome is impossible to predict. The Pentagon and Congress have to plan for these reductions, and they should start now.

Where should the budget cuts come from? For starters, we should stop funding excessive, Cold War-era nuclear weapon systems and capabilities that do not help address current or likely security threats. As the Obama administration noted in its 2010 Nuclear Posture Review (NPR), “The massive nuclear arsenal we inherited from the Cold War era of bipolar military confrontation is poorly suited to address the challenges posed by suicidal terrorists and unfriendly regimes seeking nuclear weapons.”

The most pressing security threats we face today, such as terrorism and cyber attack, simply cannot be addressed with nuclear weapons. The United States does not need to continue to deploy as many as 1,550 strategic nuclear warheads as is allowed under the New START treaty to deter nuclear attack from Russia or any other nuclear-armed state, nor does it need to spend hundreds of billions over the next decade to rebuild the nuclear “triad.”

At the same time, the Obama administration is re-examining the fundamental purpose of U.S. nuclear weapons and how many the country really needs. This review, called the NPR Implementation Study, will likely alter obsolete nuclear deterrence requirements and clear the way for further reciprocal nuclear reductions with Russia.

Even though current nuclear delivery systems will remain operational for another 20-30 years, key decisions on their replacements are being made right now.

Major procurement decisions should be informed by the results of the administration’s review of nuclear forces. To its credit, Pentagon officials told Congress last month that “no decisions have been made with respect to future force sizing or the modernization plans for nuclear delivery systems; such decisions will be informed by the Administration’s ongoing review of deterrence requirements.”

Rather than build a new, more expensive version of the nuclear triad from the 1960s, we must recognize that the world has changed. The Cold War ended 20 years ago, but U.S. and Russian arsenals far exceed what is necessary to deter nuclear attack. According to the State Department, as of Sept. 1 the United States deployed 1,790 warheads on 822 strategic delivery vehicles, and Russia...
deployed 1,566 warheads on 516 strategic delivery vehicles. Each side possesses thousands more warheads in storage.

No other nuclear-armed country deploys more than 300 strategic warheads; China has no more than 40 to 50 warheads on intercontinental-range missiles. Nevertheless, both Russia and the United States currently plan to spend scarce resources to modernize and deploy excessive numbers of nuclear weapons for decades to come.

The United States can save at least $45 billion over the next 10 years and still maintain a formidable and survivable nuclear force. Here’s how:

**Rightsize the submarine force:** Current Navy plans call for 12 new ballistic missile submarines—each with 16 nuclear-armed missiles—to replace the existing fleet of 12 operational Trident subs. Each new sub would cost an average of $7 billion; the entire fleet would cost $350 billion to build and operate over 50 years. The United States can rightsize the current and future ballistic missile submarine fleet from 12 to 8 and save $27 billion over 10 years (and $120 billion over the life of the program). Eight operational boats would allow the Pentagon to deploy the same number of sea-based warheads (about 1,000) as planned under New START.

**Delay the new strategic bomber:** The Air Force plans to retain 60 nuclear-capable, long-range B-2 and B-52 bombers into the 2040s, but has begun research on a new nuclear-capable heavy bomber, which could cost $50 billion or more to build. It would carry a new air-launched, nuclear-capable cruise missile. There is no rush to field a new bomber given that the Pentagon’s plan to deploy 60 heavy bombers under New START will be achieved with existing aircraft. Delaying this program would save $18 billion over the next decade, according to the Pentagon.

For additional savings, the Pentagon could consider reductions to its land-based strategic missile force. The Air Force plans to maintain a force of up to 420 land-based missiles through 2030, and wants to buy a follow-on missile in the future. An additional $8 billion could be saved by “eliminating” the land-based missile leg of the nuclear triad, according to the Pentagon. Short of elimination, these missiles could be reduced and the follow-on missile program cancelled.

**The Bottom Line**

Wasting billions on an excessive nuclear force does nothing to help convince nations, such as Iran or North Korea, or terrorist actors to abandon their pursuit of dangerous weapons.

Nevertheless, “defense hawks” in Congress are calling the sequestration “dangerous” and the military services are lining up to protect their pet programs, such as the new ballistic missile submarine.

Fresh thinking is in order. The automatic reductions, although large, are achievable if done smartly. National security can actually be enhanced through greater budget discipline. Programs that address low priority threats must be scaled back to preserve more pressing national security needs.

As Senate Armed Services Committee Chairman Carl Levin (D-Mich.) said Nov. 11, “The amount of money we’re spending on maintaining nuclear weapons, modernizing nuclear weapons, is not in keeping with the modern world. It’s much more a Cold War remnant.”

For the good of the country, it is time to fundamentally rethink federal spending on nuclear weapons.

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