

## Defuse the Exploding Costs of Nuclear Weapons

- [Arms Control Today](#)

### [Daryl G. Kimball](#)

If Congress and the White House are serious about reducing the growing federal deficit, they must seize the opportunity to scale back costly schemes for building a new generation of strategic nuclear delivery systems and rebuilding tactical nuclear bombs.

More than two decades after the end of the Cold War, the United States still maintains a strategic nuclear triad that is sized to launch far more nuclear weapons than necessary to deter nuclear attack. Today, the United States deploys 1,722 warheads on 806 strategic missiles and bombers, while Russia deploys 1,499 warheads on 491 strategic missiles and bombers. Each side has thousands more warheads in reserve. The direct cost of the U.S. arsenal and its support infrastructure exceeds \$31 billion annually, according to independent estimates.

The result is nuclear excess. Other than Russia, the only potential U.S. adversary with a long-range nuclear capability is China, which has no more than 50 to 75 single-warhead strategic missiles, according to the Pentagon. Just one U.S. nuclear-armed submarine loaded with 24 missiles, each armed with four 455-kiloton warheads, could kill millions. As the Pentagon's 2012 defense strategy paper correctly asserts, "It is possible that our deterrence goals can be achieved with a smaller nuclear force."

Nevertheless, the Navy wants to design and build 12 new nuclear-armed ballistic missile submarines to carry more than 1,000 strategic nuclear warheads into the 2070s, at a total cost of almost \$350 billion. The Air Force is seeking new, nuclear-armed strategic bombers that would cost at least \$68 billion, as well as a new fleet of land-based ballistic missiles. Modernization and operation of the United States' 450 Minuteman III land-based ballistic missiles would cost billions more.

Meanwhile, Russia is pursuing its own, expensive ballistic missile modernization program to maintain pace with the United States. If Moscow and Washington maintain excessive forces, it is more likely that China will increase the size and lethality of its strategic nuclear force. Rather than inducing others to build up, Russia and the United States should realize that it is in their security interest to accelerate the pace of planned reductions and reduce their stockpiles well below the 1,550-warhead ceiling set by the New Strategic Arms Reduction Treaty.

The first logical step is to reduce the size of the U.S. nuclear-armed strategic submarine force. In January 2012, the Pentagon said it would delay deployment of the first replacement nuclear-armed submarine by two years, starting in 2031 rather than 2029. This will save \$6-7 billion in the next 10 years. Without a reduction in the size of the force, however, the overall cost of the program will remain the same and take resources away from the Navy's other high-priority shipbuilding projects.

By reducing the existing Ohio-class nuclear-armed sub fleet from 14 to eight or fewer boats and building no more than eight new nuclear-armed subs, the United States could save \$18 billion more over 10 years and \$120 billion over the 50-year life span of the program. By revising Cold War-era prompt launch requirements and increasing the number of missile tubes and warhead loadings on each submarine, the Navy could still deploy the same number of strategic nuclear warheads as currently planned (about 1,000) at sea on a smaller fleet of eight subs.

For the second step, the United States can delay work on a new \$55 billion, nuclear-armed strategic

## Defuse the Exploding Costs of Nuclear Weapons

Published on Arms Control Association (<https://www.armscontrol.org>)

---

bomber fleet. There is no rush to field a fleet of new bombers given the Pentagon's plan to retain 60 of the existing nuclear-capable, long-range B-2 and B-52 bombers into the 2040s. Delaying development of the new bomber would save \$18 billion over the next decade.

A third way to reduce nuclear excess would be to trim the land-based intercontinental ballistic missile force from 420 to 300 or fewer by cutting one squadron at each of the three Air Force bases where such missiles are deployed and forgoing a follow-on missile program. This move would save approximately \$360 million in operations and maintenance costs in the coming fiscal year and billions more in future years.

Furthermore, the White House and Congress must enforce greater budgetary and design discipline for the ambitious B61 nuclear warhead life extension program. According to a new Pentagon audit, the cost of upgrading about 300 units of the tactical version and about 100 of the strategic version of the warhead is estimated to exceed \$10.4 billion.

Rather than refurbish the tactical versions of the weapon, which are still deployed in Europe even though they are no longer relevant for the defense of NATO, Congress could save billions by directing the weapons laboratories to focus on replacing the tritium and radar components for just the strategic version, known as the B61-7.

In a time of budget austerity, nuclear weapons that are not necessary to deter nuclear attack by potential adversaries should not be on the Pentagon's shopping list.

Posted: November 29, 2012

**Source URL:** [https://www.armscontrol.org/act/2012\\_12/Focus](https://www.armscontrol.org/act/2012_12/Focus)