

## CSBA Downplays Nuclear Effect on Budget, Potential Nuclear Savings

Authored by Nate Sans and Kingston Reif on Fri, 2015-08-14 12:04

On August 4 the Center for Strategic and Budgetary Assessments (CSBA) published a detailed [estimate](#) of the long-term costs of sustaining and modernizing U.S. nuclear weapons and their supporting infrastructure. The report, written by CSBA's Todd Harrison and Evan Braden Montgomery, concludes that "Although the costs of sustaining and modernizing U.S. nuclear forces are projected to grow in the years ahead...those costs will still account for a small fraction of total defense spending, even at their peak." Moreover, they write, "cutting nuclear weapons is unlikely to provide enough savings to help manage the near-term resource constraints" imposed by the 2011 Budget Control Act.

The CSBA report is an important and useful contribution to the debate about the cost of nuclear weapons. Harrison and Montgomery corroborates previous estimates that the cost of nuclear forces are poised to double over the next decade or so, and overall these forces could cost almost \$1 trillion over the next thirty years.

However, the report downplays the financial burden that current nuclear weapons spending plans will impose on the national defense budget. Harrison and Montgomery are correct that "what the United States can or cannot afford depends on the priorities set by policymakers." The problem is the plans exceed what is required for nuclear deterrence and prioritizing them runs a high risk of forcing counterproductive cuts to other defense and national security priorities.

### CSBA's Estimate

Harrison and Montgomery estimate nuclear weapons will cost \$100-\$113 billion over the next five years (FY 2016-FY 2020), \$222-\$253 billion over the next ten years (FY 2015-FY 2024), and \$836-\$963 billion over roughly the next thirty years (FY 2014-FY 2043). Notably, they write, the annual cost of nuclear weapons "is projected to grow significantly in the coming years from \$17 billion in FY 2015 to over \$34 billion by FY 2029" when the procurement of new nuclear submarines, missiles, and bombers will be at its peak.

Despite this increase in costs, Harrison and Montgomery calculate that nuclear weapons won't consume more than five percent of the total national defense budget over the next 25 years, even at the peaks of the anticipated nuclear spending bow wave in the 2020s. Had the authors made different assumptions about what counts as a nuclear cost, such as including a higher percentage of the cost of the long-range strategic bomber (LRS-B)— as the Congressional Budget Office (CBO) did in its two [recent reports](#) on nuclear weapons spending— the nuclear share of total defense spending would be higher.

In addition to estimating the long-term cost of nuclear forces, the CSBA report also assesses potential savings from nuclear reductions. Harrison and Montgomery considered a number of savings options, such as eliminating the B61 gravity bomb and associated dual capable aircraft, reducing the ballistic submarine fleet to 10 boats, cutting a Minuteman III intercontinental ballistic missile (ICBM) wing, and delaying the planned Minuteman III replacement. They found that pursuing these options would lead to approximately \$20 billion in savings through the end of the decade, a figure they deem insufficient to help manage near-term constraints on defense spending.

### Are Nuclear Weapons Affordable?

In light of the modernization needs of other defense systems and congressionally-mandated reductions in planned military expenses required by the [Budget Control Act](#), military leaders continue to warn that the United States is facing an affordability problem in the near future when it

comes to sustaining and modernizing nuclear forces.

“[W]e do have a huge affordability problem with that basket of [nuclear weapons] systems,” [said](#) Frank Kendall, under secretary of defense for acquisition, technology, and logistics, in April. “It is starting to poke itself into the [future years defense plan] -- the five-year plan now. And we're trying to address it.”

Likewise, Deputy Secretary of Defense Robert Work [told](#) the House Armed Services Committee in June, “When combined with the continuing cost to sustain the current force while we build the new one this will roughly double the share of the defense budget allocated to the nuclear mission.

“This will require very hard choices and increased risk in some missions without additional funding above current defense budget levels,” he added.

The fiscal challenge of affording nuclear weapons is even more acute the further one drills into the budget. For example, CBO released a [report](#) in March on “Preserving the Navy's Forward Presence with a Smaller Fleet,” which stated unless the Navy receives historically high annual levels of funding for shipbuilding over the next 30 years, the inventory of ballistic missile submarines could be reduced from the current level of 14 to six to eight during the 2030s by financial default. On the other hand, if the Navy chooses to prioritize the nuclear subs, the damage to the rest of its shipbuilding goals would be severe.

Meanwhile, a different [report](#) co-authored by Harrison last year observed that the Air Force’s acquisition of the F-35 Joint Strike Fighter will be at its highest during the decade between FY 2021 and FY 2030, costing roughly \$15 billion each year. Air Force acquisition of the modified KC-46 tanker will occur during the first half of that decade, costing about \$3 billion per year. The Air Force’s Evolved Expendable Launch Vehicle (EELV), which provides rocket launch services to the Defense Department and intelligence community, will soak up \$3 billion each year from 2023 to 2028.

These conventional modernization programs will overlap with the Air Force’s plans to buy the nuclear-capable LRS-B, a new nuclear-capable cruise missile, and a successor to the Minuteman III ICBM.

Is it possible that after the Budget Control Act expires, defense spending could rise to a level that would allow the military to pay for all of its nuclear and conventional priorities? Yes, it’s possible.

However, [according to](#) the Congressional Research Service’s Amy Woolf, “It seems unlikely that spending on nuclear weapons will grow at a rate needed to support the full scope of the modernization plans.” Unforeseen cost overruns, which are not atypical for big-ticket Defense and Energy Department acquisition programs, would exacerbate the budget challenge.

This all means that fully resourcing those plans will require something else in the military budget to pay the bill.

### **Choosing the Right Priorities**

Fortunately, current nuclear weapons spending plans can change without undermining U.S. national security.

The current plans assume that the United States will maintain a nuclear arsenal like the one it has now for decades to come. However, the U.S. military has already determined that the United States can reduce the size of its deployed strategic nuclear arsenal by up to one-third below the New Strategic Arms Reduction Treaty levels.

Given current budget constraints, higher priority defense needs, and the fact that the current arsenal of approximately 4,800 nuclear weapons is largely irrelevant to America’s most pressing national security challenges, the United States cannot afford and does not need to overspend on nuclear weapons.

While Harrison and Montgomery emphasize the limited savings from nuclear cuts over the next five

## **CSBA Downplays Nuclear Effect on Budget, Potential Nuclear Savings**

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

---

years, they identify approximately \$77 billion in savings during the decade of the 2020s when the cost of modernizing the U.S. nuclear arsenal is expected to be at its highest.

The budget challenge facing the military can't be solved on the back of nuclear weapons, but billions could be saved and put toward higher priority national security missions by trimming portions of the arsenal and scaling back current modernization plans.

As it evaluates the administration's nuclear weapons spending proposals, Congress needs to ask hard questions about why more cost effective options for sustaining the arsenal have not received more consideration.

**Source URL:** <https://www.armscontrol.org/blog/2015-08-14/csba-downplays-nuclear-effect-budget-potential-nuclear-savings>