Congressional Research Service
Informing the legislative debate since 1914

U.S. Strategic Nuclear Forces: Background, Developments, and Issues

Updated July 13, 2021

Congressional Research Service
https://crsreports.congress.gov
RL33640

CRS REPORT
Prepared for Members and
Committees of Congress

Summary

Even though the United States has reduced the number of warheads deployed on its long-range missiles and bombers, consistent with the terms of the 2010 New START Treaty, it is also developing new delivery systems for deployment over the next 10-30 years. The 117th Congress will continue to review these programs, and the funding requested for them, during the annual authorization and appropriations process.

During the Cold War, the U.S. nuclear arsenal contained many types of delivery vehicles for nuclear weapons. The longer-range systems, which included long-range missiles based on U.S. territory, long-range missiles based on submarines, and heavy bombers that could threaten Soviet targets from their bases in the United States, are known as strategic nuclear delivery vehicles. At the end of the Cold War, in 1991, the United States deployed more than 10,000 warheads on these delivery vehicles. With the implementation of New START completed in February 2018, the United States is limited to 1,550 accountable warheads on these delivery vehicles, a restriction that will remain in place through February 2026, while New START Treaty remains in force.

At the present time, the U.S. land-based ballistic missile force (ICBMs) consists of 400 land-based Minuteman III ICBMs, each deployed with one warhead, spread among a total of 450 operational launchers. This force is consistent with the New START Treaty. The Air Force has modernized the Minuteman missiles, replacing and upgrading their rocket motors, guidance systems, and other components, so that they can remain in the force through 2030. It has initiated a program to replace these with a new Ground-based Strategic Deterrent beginning around 2029.

The U.S. ballistic missile submarine fleet currently consists of 14 Trident submarines. Each can carry 20 Trident II (D-5) missiles—a reduction from 24 missiles per submarine—with the total meeting the launcher limits in the New START Treaty. The Navy converted 4 of the original 18 Trident submarines to carry nonnuclear cruise missiles. Nine of the submarines are deployed in the Pacific Ocean and five are in the Atlantic. The Navy also has undertaken efforts to extend the life of the missiles and warheads so that they and the submarines can remain in the fleet past 2020. It has designed and is beginning production of the new Columbia class submarine that will replace the existing fleet beginning in 2031.

The U.S. fleet of heavy bombers includes 20 B-2 bombers and 40 nuclear-capable B-52 bombers. The B-1 bomber is no longer equipped for nuclear missions. This fleet of 60 nuclear-capable aircraft is consistent with the U.S. obligations under New START. The Air Force has begun to retire the nuclear-armed cruise missiles carried by B-52 bombers, leaving only about half the B-52 fleet equipped to carry nuclear weapons. The Air Force plans to procure both a new long-range bomber, known as the B-21, and a new long-range standoff (LRSO) cruise missile during the 2020s. DOE is also modifying and extending the life of the B61 bomb carried on B-2 bombers and fighter aircraft and the W80 warhead for cruise missiles.

The Obama Administration completed a review of the size and structure of the U.S. nuclear force, and a review of U.S. nuclear employment policy, in June 2013. This review advised the force structure that the United States has deployed under the New START Treaty. The Trump Administration completed its review of U.S. nuclear forces in February 2018, and reaffirmed the basic contours of the current U.S. force structure and the ongoing modernization programs. The Trump Administration also deployed a new low-yield warhead on Trident II (D-5) missiles. The Biden Administration will begin its review of U.S. nuclear posture in July 2021 and plans to complete this review in early 2022. Congress will review plans for U.S. strategic nuclear forces and will likely assess the costs of these plans in the current fiscal environment.

Contents

Introduction 1
Background: The Strategic Triad 3
Force Structure and Size During the Cold War 3
Force Structure and Size After the Cold War 4
Current Force Structure and Size 7
Strategic Nuclear Delivery Vehicles: Post-Cold War Reductions and Current Modernization Programs 10
Intercontinental Ballistic Missiles (ICBMs) 10
Peacekeeper (MX) 10
Minuteman III 10
Minuteman Modernization Programs 13
Ground-Based Strategic Deterrent (GBSD) 17
Minuteman III Life Extension as an Alternative to GBSD 21
W87-1 Warhead 22
Submarine-Launched Ballistic Missiles 24
The SSGN Program 25
The Backfit Program 25
Basing Changes 26
Warhead Loadings 26
Modernization Plans and Programs 27
The Columbia Class Submarine 32
Bombers 37
B-1 Bomber 37
B-2 Bomber 38
B-52 Bomber 41
B-21 Bomber 46
Sustaining the Nuclear Weapons Enterprise 49
Issues for Congress 51
Force Size 52
Force Structure 55
Debate About the Need for a Triad 55
Debate About Specific Legs of the Triad 56
Debate About Low-Yield Weapons 58
The Cost of Nuclear Weapons 59

Figures

Figure 1. U.S. Strategic Nuclear Weapons: 1960-1990 3
Figure 2. U.S. Strategic Nuclear Forces: 1991-2020 5

Tables

Table 1. U.S. Strategic Nuclear Forces Under START I and START II 6
Table 2. U.S. Strategic Nuclear Forces under New START 8

Contacts

Author Information 62

Introduction

During the Cold War, the U.S. nuclear arsenal contained many types of delivery vehicles for nuclear weapons. These included short-range missiles and artillery for use on the battlefield, medium-range missiles and aircraft that could strike targets beyond the theater of battle, short- and medium-range systems based on surface ships, long-range missiles based on U.S. territory and submarines, and heavy bombers that could threaten Soviet targets from their bases in the United States. The short- and medium-range systems are considered nonstrategic nuclear weapons and have been referred to as battlefield, tactical, and theater nuclear weapons. The long-range missiles and heavy bombers are known as strategic nuclear delivery vehicles.

In 1990, as the Cold War was drawing to a close and the Soviet Union entered its final year, the United States had more than 12,000 nuclear warheads deployed on 1,875 strategic nuclear delivery vehicles.[1] As of July 1, 2009, according to the counting rules in the original Strategic Arms Reduction Treaty (START), the United States had reduced to 5,916 nuclear warheads on 1,188 strategic nuclear delivery vehicles.[2] Under the terms of the 2002 Strategic Offensive Reduction Treaty (known as the Moscow Treaty) between the United States and Russia, this number was to decline to no more than 2,200 operationally deployed strategic nuclear warheads by the end of 2012. The U.S. Department of State reported that the United States had reached that level, with only 1,968 operationally deployed strategic warheads in December 2009.[3] The New START Treaty, signed by President Obama and Russia's President Medvedev on April 8, 2010, reduced those forces further, to no more than 1,550 warheads on deployed launchers and heavy bombers.[4] According to the U.S. Department of State, on March 1, 2021, the United States had 1,357 warheads on 651 deployed ICBMs, SLBMs, and heavy bombers, within a total of 800 deployed and nondeployed ICBMs, SLBMs, and heavy bombers.[5]

Although these numbers do not count the same categories of nuclear weapons, they indicate that the number of deployed warheads on U.S. strategic nuclear forces has declined significantly in the decades following the end of the Cold War. Yet, nuclear weapons continue to play a key role in U.S. national security strategy, and the United States does not, at this time, plan to either eliminate its nuclear weapons or abandon the strategy of nuclear deterrence that has served as a core concept in U.S. national security strategy for more than 60 years. In a speech in Prague on April 5, 2009, President Obama highlighted "America's commitment to seek the peace and security of a world without nuclear weapons." But he recognized that this goal would not be

[1] Natural Resources Defense Council. Table of U.S. Strategic Offensive Force Loadings. Archive of Nuclear Data. http://www.nrdc.org/nuclear/nudb/datab1.asp. The same source indicates that the Soviet Union, in 1990, had just over 11,000 warheads on 2,332 strategic nuclear delivery vehicles.

[2] Russia, by the same accounting, had 3,909 warheads on 814 delivery vehicles. See U.S. Department of State, Bureau of Verification, Compliance and Inspection. Fact Sheet. START Aggregate Numbers of Strategic Offensive Weapons. October 1, 2009. Washington, DC.

[3] U.S. Department of State, Bureau of Public Affairs, *The Nuclear Nonproliferation Treaty: Promoting Disarmament*, Washington, DC, April 27, 2010, http://www.state.gov/documents/organization/141497.pdf.

[4] The parties are to meet this limit within seven years of entry-into-force, which could occur in early 2011. For more information on the New START Treaty, see CRS Report R41219, *The New START Treaty: Central Limits and Key Provisions*, by Amy F. Woolf.

[5] U.S. Department of State, Bureau of State, Bureau of Arms Control, Verification, and Compliance, New START Treaty Aggregate Numbers of Strategic Offensive Forces, Fact Sheet, Washington, DC, https://www.state.gov/new-start-treaty-aggregate-numbers-of-strategic-offensive-arms-2/https://www.state.gov/new-start-treaty-aggregate-numbers-of-strategic-offensive-arms-15/.

reached quickly, and probably not in his lifetime.[6] And, even though President Obama pledged to reduce the roles and numbers of U.S. nuclear forces, the 2010 Nuclear Posture Review noted that "the fundamental role of U.S. nuclear weapons, which will continue as long as nuclear weapons exist, is to deter nuclear attack on the United States, our allies, and partners."[7] Moreover, in the 2010 NPR and in the June 2013 Report on the Nuclear Employment Guidance of the United States,[8] the Obama Administration indicated that the United States would pursue programs that would allow it to modernize and adjust its strategic forces so that they remained capable in coming years.

The Trump Administration emphasized its continuing support for the U.S. nuclear arsenal in the Nuclear Posture Review released on February 2, 2018. This document noted that "the current threat environment and future uncertainties now necessitate a national commitment to maintain modern and effective nuclear forces, as well as the infrastructure needed to support them."[9] The report not only reaffirmed the basic contours of the current U.S. force structure and the ongoing modernization programs, it also called for the development of a new low-yield warhead for deployment on Trident II (D-5) missiles.

The Biden Administration, in its Interim National Security Strategic Guidance, indicated that the United States would "take steps to reduce the role of nuclear weapons in our national security strategy, while ensuring our strategic deterrent remains safe, secure, and effective and that our extended deterrence commitments to our allies remain strong and credible."[10] The Administration has not yet conducted its nuclear posture review, but it has continued request funding for each of the ongoing nuclear modernization programs (described below) in its budget request for FY2022.[11]

Most Members of Congress have supported the general contours of U.S. nuclear posture. While some programs have been open to scrutiny, Congress has continued to support funding for most aspects of the ongoing modernization programs. Nevertheless, questions about the costs of these programs, and the trade-offs they might require within the defense budget, surfaced after Congress passed the Budget Control Act in 2011 and have continued to animate debate during the annual authorizations and appropriations process. Congress may again address questions about the costs of the nuclear modernization programs, the rationale for some of the programs, and the possible trade-offs with other defense priorities, as the Pentagon absorbs the costs of responding to the Covid-19 crisis and possibly alters its procurement and readiness priorities.

This report reviews the ongoing programs that will affect the expected size and shape of the U.S. strategic nuclear force structure. It begins with an overview of this force structure during the Cold War, and summarizes the reductions and changes that have occurred since 1991. It then offers details about each category of delivery vehicle—land-based intercontinental ballistic missiles (ICBMs), submarine-launched ballistic missiles (SLBMs), and heavy bombers—focusing on their current deployments and ongoing and planned modernization programs. The report concludes

[6] The White House, Office of the Press Secretary, *Remarks by President Obama*, Prague, Czech Republic, April 5, 2009, https://obamawhitehouse.archives.gov/the-press-office/remarks-president-barack-obama-prague-delivered.

[7] Department of Defense, *Nuclear Posture Review*, Washington, DC, April 6, 2010, p. 15, https://dod.defense.gov/Portals/1/features/defenseReviews/NPR/2010_Nuclear_Posture_Review_Report.pdf.

[8] https://apps.dtic.mil/dtic/tr/fulltext/u2/a590745.pdf.

[9] Department of Defense, *Nuclear Posture Review*, Washington, DC, February 2, 2018, p. 2, https://media.defense.gov/2018/Feb/02/2001872886/-1/-1/1/2018-NUCLEAR-POSTURE-REVIEW-FINAL-REPORT.PDF.

[10] The White House, *Interim National Security Strategic Guidance*, Washington, DC, March 2021, p. 13, https://www.whitehouse.gov/wp-content/uploads/2021/03/NSC-1v2.pdf.

[11] Kingston Reif, "Biden Continues Trump Nuclear Funding," *Arms Control Today*, July/August 2021. https://www.armscontrol.org/act/2021-07/news/biden-continues-trump-nuclear-funding#.YN-N_siC2nY.twitter.

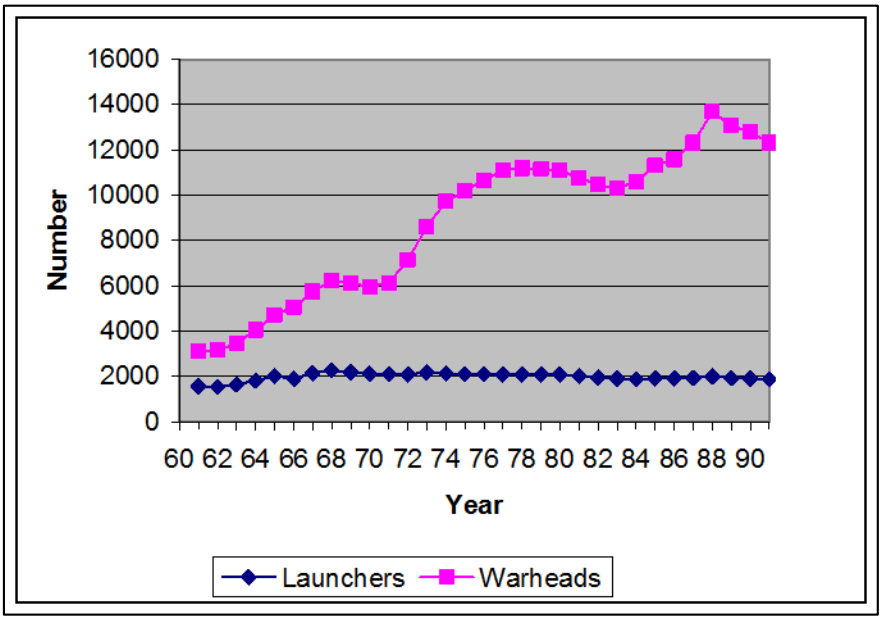
with a discussion of issues related to decisions about the future size and shape of the U.S. strategic nuclear force.

Background: The Strategic Triad

Force Structure and Size During the Cold War

Since the early 1960s the United States has maintained a "triad" of strategic nuclear delivery vehicles. The United States first developed these three types of nuclear delivery vehicles, in large part, because each of the military services wanted to play a role in the U.S. nuclear arsenal. However, during the 1960s and 1970s, analysts developed a more reasoned rationale for the nuclear "triad." They argued that these different basing modes had complementary strengths and weaknesses. They would enhance deterrence and discourage a Soviet first strike because they complicated Soviet attack planning and ensured the survivability of a significant portion of the U.S. force in the event of a Soviet first strike.[12] The different characteristics might also strengthen the credibility of U.S. targeting strategy. For example, ICBMs eventually had the accuracy and prompt responsiveness needed to attack hardened targets such as Soviet command posts and ICBM silos, SLBMs had the survivability needed to complicate Soviet efforts to launch a disarming first strike and to retaliate if such an attack were attempted,[13] and heavy bombers could be dispersed quickly and launched to enhance their survivability, and they could be recalled to their bases if a crisis did not escalate into conflict.

Figure 1. U.S. Strategic Nuclear Weapons: 1960-1990



Source: Natural Resources Defense Council, Archive of Nuclear Data.

[12] Department of Defense. *Annual Report to Congress, Fiscal Year 1989*, by Frank Carlucci, Secretary of Defense. February 18, 1988. Washington, DC, 1988. p. 54.

[13] In the early 1990s, SLBMs also acquired the accuracy needed to attack many hardened sites in the former Soviet Union.

Figure 1 displays the increases in delivery vehicles and warheads in the U.S. force structure between 1960, when the United States first began to deploy ICBMs, and 1990, the year before the United States and Soviet Union signed the first Strategic Arms Reduction Treaty (START). According to unclassified estimates, these numbers grew steadily through the mid-1960s, with the greatest number of delivery vehicles, 2,268, deployed in 1967. The number then held relatively steady through 1990, at between 1,875 and 2,200 ICBMs, SLBMs, and heavy bombers. The number of warheads carried on these delivery vehicles increased sharply through 1975, then, after a brief pause, again rose sharply in the early 1980s, peaking at around 13,600 warheads in 1987.

The sharp increase in warheads in the early 1970s reflects the deployment of ICBMs and SLBMs with multiple warheads, known as MIRVs (multiple independent reentry vehicles). In particular, the United States began to deploy the Minuteman III ICBM, with 3 warheads on each missile, in 1970, and the Poseidon SLBM, which could carry 10 warheads on each missile, in 1971.[14] The increase in warheads in the mid-1980s reflects the deployment of the Peacekeeper (MX) ICBM, which carried 10 warheads on each missile.

In 1990, before it concluded the START Treaty with the Soviet Union, the United States deployed a total of around 12,304 warheads on its ICBMs, SLBMs, and heavy bombers. The ICBM force consisted of single-warhead Minuteman II missiles, 3-warhead Minuteman III missiles, and 10-warhead Peacekeeper (MX) missiles, for a total force of 2,450 warheads on 1,000 missiles. The submarine force included Poseidon submarines with Poseidon C-3 and Trident I (C-4) missiles, and the Ohio-class Trident submarines with Trident I, and some Trident II (D-5) missiles. The total force consisted of 5,216 warheads on around 600 missiles.[15] The bomber force centered on 94 B-52H bombers and 96 B-1 bombers, along with many of the older B-52G bombers and 2 of the new (at the time) B-2 bombers. This force of 260 bombers could carry over 4,648 weapons.

Force Structure and Size After the Cold War

During the 1990s, the United States reduced the numbers and types of weapons in its strategic nuclear arsenal, both as a part of its modernization process and in response to the limits in the 1991 START Treaty. The United States continued to maintain a triad of strategic nuclear forces, however, with warheads deployed on ICBMs, SLBMs, and bombers. According to the Department of Defense, this mix of forces not only offered the United States a range of capabilities and flexibility in nuclear planning and complicated an adversary's attack planning, but also hedged against unexpected problems in any single delivery system. This latter issue became more of a concern in this time period, as the United States retired many of the different types of warheads and missiles that it had deployed over the years, reducing the redundancy in its force.

The 1991 START Treaty limited the United States to a maximum of 6,000 total warheads, and 4,900 warheads on ballistic missiles, deployed on up to 1,600 strategic offensive delivery vehicles. However, the treaty did not count the actual number of warheads deployed on each type of ballistic missile or bomber. Instead, it used "counting rules" to determine how many warheads would count against the treaty's limits. For ICBMs and SLBMs, this number usually equaled the actual number of warheads deployed on the missile. Bombers, however, used a different system.

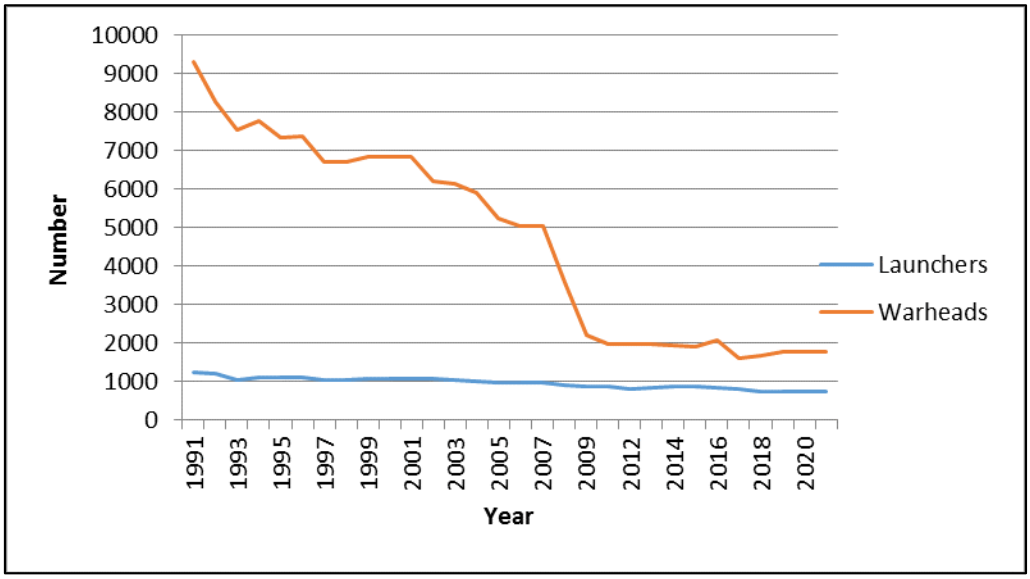
[14] GlobalSecurity.org LGM Minuteman III History and Poseidon C-3 History. http://www.globalsecurity.org/wmd/systems/lgm-30_3-hist.htm and http://www.globalsecurity.org/wmd/systems/c-3.htm.

[15] The older Poseidon submarines were in the process of being retired, and the number of missiles and warheads in the submarine fleet dropped quickly in the early 1990s, to around 2,688 warheads on 336 missiles by 1993. See Natural Resources Defense Council. Table of U.S. Strategic Offensive Force Loadings. Archive of Nuclear Data. http://www.nrdc.org/nuclear/nudb/datab1.asp.

Bombers that were not equipped to carry air-launched cruise missiles (the B-1 and B-2 bombers) counted as one warhead; bombers equipped to carry air-launched cruise missiles (B-52 bombers) could carry 20 missiles, but would only count as 10 warheads against the treaty limits. These rules have led to differing estimates of the numbers of warheads on U.S. strategic nuclear forces during the 1990s; some estimates count only those warheads that count against the treaty while others count all the warheads that could be carried by the deployed delivery systems.

According to unclassified data, the United States reduced its nuclear weapons from 9,300 warheads on 1,239 delivery vehicles in 1991 to 6,196 warheads on 1,064 delivery vehicles when it completed the implementation of START in 2001. By 2009, the United States had reduced its forces to approximately 2,200 warheads on around 850 delivery vehicles. According to the U.S. Department of State, as of December 2009, the United States had 1,968 operationally deployed warheads on its strategic offensive nuclear forces.[16] The Bulletin of the Atomic Scientists, in its Nuclear Notebook, estimated that these numbers held steady in 2010, prior to New START's entry into force, then began to decline again, falling to around 1,750 warheads on around 750 delivery vehicles by 2019, as the United States implemented the reductions mandated by New START (this total includes weapons that the U.S. Department of State does not count in the New START force).[17] These numbers, which have held steady through 2021, appear in **Figure 2**.

Figure 2. U.S. Strategic Nuclear Forces: 1991-2020



Source: Natural Resources Defense Council, Archive of Nuclear Data, Bulletin of the Atomic Scientists, Nuclear Notebook.

During the 1990s, the United States continued to add to its Trident fleet, reaching a total of 18 submarines. It retired all of its remaining Poseidon submarines and all of the single-warhead Minuteman II missiles. It continued to deploy B-2 bombers, reaching a total of 21, and removed some of the older B-52G bombers from the nuclear fleet. Consequently, in 2001, its warheads were deployed on 18 Trident submarines with 24 missiles on each submarine and 6 or 8 warheads on each missile; 500 Minuteman III ICBMs, with up to 3 warheads on each missile; 50

[16] U.S. Department of State, Bureau of Verification, Compliance, and Implementation, *The Legacy of START and Related U.S. Policies*, Fact Sheet, Washington, DC, July 16, 2009, http://www.state.gov/t/avc/rls/126119.htm.

[17] Hans M. Kristensen and Robert S. Norris, "U.S. Nuclear Forces, 2015," *Bulletin of the Atomic Scientists*, March 2015. http://bos.sagepub.com/content/71/2/107.full.pdf+html.

Peacekeeper (MX) missiles, with 10 warheads on each missile; 94 B-52H bombers, with up to 20 cruise missiles on each bomber; and 21 B-2 bombers with up to 16 bombs on each aircraft.

The United States and Russia signed a second START Treaty in early 1993. Under this treaty, the United States would have had to reduce its strategic offensive nuclear weapons to between 3,000 and 3,500 accountable warheads. In 1994, the Department of Defense decided that, to meet this limit, it would deploy a force of 500 Minuteman III ICBMs with 1 warhead on each missile, 14 Trident submarines with 24 missiles on each submarine and 5 warheads on each missile, 76 B-52 bombers, and 21 B-2 bombers. The Air Force was to eliminate 50 Peacekeeper ICBMs and reorient the B-1 bombers to nonnuclear missions; the Navy would retire 4 Trident submarines (it later decided to convert these submarines to carry conventional weapons).

The START II Treaty never entered into force, and Congress prevented the Clinton Administration from reducing U.S. forces unilaterally to START II limits. Nevertheless, the Navy and Air Force continued to plan for the forces described above, and eventually implemented those changes. **Table 1** displays the forces the United States had deployed in 2001, after completing the START I reductions. It also includes those that it would have deployed under START II, in accordance with the 1994 decisions. (The forces deployed under the 2010 New START Treaty appear on **Table 2**, below.)

Table 1. U.S. Strategic Nuclear Forces Under START I and START II

	Deployed under START I (2001)		Planned for START II (2003)	
System	**Launchers**	**Accountable Warheads[a]**	**Launchers**	**Accountable Warheads**
Minuteman III ICBMs	500	1,200	500	500
Peacekeeper ICBMs	50	500	0	0
Trident I Missiles	168	1,008	0	0
Trident II Missiles	264	2,112	336	1,680
B-52 H Bombers (ALCM)	97	970	76	940
B-52 H Bombers (non-ALCM)	47	47	0	0
B-1 Bombers[b]	90	90	0	0
B-2 Bombers	20	20	21	336
Total	**1,237**	**5,948**	**933**	**3,456**

Source: U.S. Department of State and CRS estimates.

a. Under START I, bombers that are not equipped to carry ALCMs count as one warhead, even if they can carry up 16 nuclear bombs; bombers that are equipped to carry ALCMs count as 10 warheads, even if they can carry up to 20 ALCMs.

b. Although they still counted under START I, B-1 bombers are no longer equipped for nuclear missions.

The George W. Bush Administration stated in late 2001 that the United States would reduce its strategic nuclear forces to 1,700-2,200 "operationally deployed warheads,"[18] a goal that was codified in the 2002 Moscow Treaty. According to the Bush Administration, operationally

[18] President Bush announced the U.S. intention to reduce its forces on November 13, 2001, during a summit with Russia's President Vladimir Putin. The United States and Russia codified these reductions in a treaty signed in May 2002. See CRS Report RL31448, *Nuclear Arms Control: The Strategic Offensive Reductions Treaty*, by Amy F. Woolf.

deployed warheads were those deployed on missiles and stored near bombers on a day-to-day basis. They are the warheads that would be available immediately, or in a matter of days, to meet "immediate and unexpected contingencies."[19] The Administration also indicated that the United States would retain a triad of ICBMs, SLBMs, and heavy bombers for the foreseeable future. It did not, however, offer a rationale for this traditional "triad," although the points raised in the past about the differing and complementary capabilities of the systems probably still pertain. Admiral James Ellis, the former Commander of the U.S. Strategic Command (STRATCOM), highlighted this when he noted in a 2005 interview that the ICBM force provides responsiveness, the SLBM force provides survivability, and bombers provide flexibility and recall capability.[20]

The Bush Administration did not specify how it would reduce the U.S. arsenal from around 6,000 warheads to the lower level of 2,200 operationally deployed warheads, although it did identify some force structure changes that would account for part of the reductions. Specifically, after Congress removed its restrictions,[21] the United States eliminated the 50 Peacekeeper ICBMs, reducing by 500 the total number of operationally deployed ICBM warheads. It also continued with plans to remove four Trident submarines from service, and converted those ships to carry nonnuclear guided missiles. These submarines would have counted as 476 warheads under the START Treaty's rules. These changes reduced U.S. forces to around 5,000 warheads on 950 delivery vehicles in 2006; this reduction appears above, in **Figure 2**. The Bush Administration also noted that two of the Trident submarines remaining in the fleet would be in overhaul at any given time. The warheads that could be carried on those submarines would not count against the Moscow Treaty limits because they would not be "operationally deployed." This would further reduce the U.S. deployed force by 200 to 400 warheads.

The Bush Administration, through the 2005 Strategic Capabilities Assessment and 2006 Quadrennial Defense Review, announced additional changes in U.S. ICBMs, SLBMs, and bomber forces; these included the elimination of 50 Minuteman III missiles and several hundred air-launched cruise missiles. (These are discussed in more detail below.) These changes appeared to be sufficient to reduce the number of operationally deployed warheads enough to meet the treaty limit of 2,200 warheads, as the United States announced, in mid-2009, that it had met this limit. Reaching this level, however, also depends on the number of warheads carried by each of the remaining Trident and Minuteman missiles.[22]

Current Force Structure and Size

The Obama Administration indicated in the 2010 NPR that the United States would retain a triad of ICBMs, SLBMs, and heavy bombers as the United States reduced its forces to the limits in the 2010 New START Treaty. The NPR indicated that the unique characteristics of each leg of the triad were important to the goal of maintaining strategic stability at reduced numbers of warheads:

---

[19] U.S. Senate. Committee on Armed Services. Statement of the Honorable Douglas J. Feith, Under Secretary of Defense For Policy. February 14, 2002.

[20] Hebert, Adam. The Future Missile Force. *Air Force Magazine*. October 2005.

[21] Beginning in FY1996, and continuing through the end of the Clinton Administration, Congress had prohibited the use of any DOD funds for the elimination of strategic nuclear delivery vehicles, below START I levels, until START II entered into force. See, for example, the FY1998 Defense Authorization Act (P.L. 105-85, §1302). Congress lifted this restriction in the FY2002 Defense Authorization Act (P.L. 107-107, §1031).

[22] "U.S. Meets Moscow Nuclear Reduction Commitment Three Years Early," *Global Security Newswire*, February 11, 2009.

> Each leg of the Triad has advantages that warrant retaining all three legs at this stage of reductions. Strategic nuclear submarines (SSBNs) and the SLBMs they carry represent the most survivable leg of the U.S. nuclear Triad…. Single-warhead ICBMs contribute to stability, and like SLBMs are not vulnerable to air defenses. Unlike ICBMs and SLBMs, bombers can be visibly deployed forward, as a signal in crisis to strengthen deterrence of potential adversaries and assurance of allies and partners.[23]

Moreover, the 2010 NPR noted that "retaining sufficient force structure in each leg to allow the ability to hedge effectively by shifting weight from one Triad leg to another if necessary due to unexpected technological problems or operational vulnerabilities."[24]

The Obama Administration continued to support the triad, even as it reduced U.S. nuclear forces under New START and considered whether to reduce U.S. nuclear forces further in the coming years. In April 2013, Madelyn Creedon, then the Assistant Secretary of Defense for Global Security Affairs, stated, "The 2010 nuclear posture review concluded that the United States will maintain a triad of ICBMs, SLBMs, and nuclear capable heavy bombers. And the president's F.Y. '14 budget request supports modernization of these nuclear forces."[25] Further, in its report on the Nuclear Employment Strategy of the United States, released in June 2013, DOD stated that the United States would maintain a nuclear triad, because this is the best way to "maintain strategic stability at reasonable cost, while hedging against potential technical problems or vulnerabilities."[26]

Table 2. U.S. Strategic Nuclear Forces under New START

(Estimated Forces prior to and planned under New START Forces)

	Estimated Forces, 2010		Forces Under New START, March 2021[a]		
	Launchers	Warheads	Total Launchers	Deployed Launchers	Warheads
Minuteman III	450	500	454	399	399
Trident	336	1,152	280	206	911
B-52	76	300	46	35	36
B-2	18	200	20	11	11
Total	**880**	**2,152**	**800**	**651**	**1,357**

Source: U.S. Department of State, Bureau of State, Bureau of Arms Control, Verification, and Compliance, New START Treaty Aggregate Numbers of Strategic Offensive Forces, Fact Sheet, Washington, DC.

a. The United States retains 14 Trident submarines, with 12 deployed and 2 in overhaul. The submarines in overhaul do not count against the treaty limits. The Navy has also eliminated 4 launchers on each submarine, so that each counts as only 20 launchers. The Air Force retains 450 Minuteman III launchers, although a maximum of 400 hold deployed missiles.

[23] Department of Defense, *Nuclear Posture Review*, Washington, DC, April 6, 2010, p. 22, https://dod.defense.gov/Portals/1/features/defenseReviews/NPR/2010_Nuclear_Posture_Review_Report.pdf.

[24] Ibid., p. 20.

[25] U.S. Congress, House Armed Forces, Strategic Forces, Hearing on the Proposed Fiscal 2014 Defense Authorization as it Relates to Atomic Energy Defense Activities, 113th Cong., 1st sess., May 9, 2013.

[26] Department of Defense, *Report on Nuclear Employment Strategy of the United States*, Washington, DC, June 2013, p. 5, https://apps.dtic.mil/dtic/tr/fulltext/u2/a590745.pdf.

On April 8, 2014, the Obama Administration released a report detailing the force structure that the United States would likely deploy under New START.[27] The report indicated that most of the reductions would come late in the treaty implementation period so that the plans could change, if necessary. This force structure included 400 Minuteman III missiles, each carrying a single warhead, and 12 deployed Ohio-class submarines (with 2 in overhaul), with each carrying 20 D-5 Trident II missiles. This force structure was consistent with the statements and adjustments the Administration had made about deploying all Minuteman III missiles with a single warhead, retaining Trident submarines deployed in two oceans, and converting some number of heavy bombers to conventional-only missions. **Table 2**, above, displays the current U.S. force structure under New START, and compares it with estimates of U.S. operational strategic nuclear forces in 2010 prior to New START's entry into force. The current force differs from the force outlined in 2014 because the number of available submarines and missiles can vary day-to-day in response to maintenance requirements.

The Trump Administration continued to adjust the U.S. nuclear force to meet the New START limits. When the treaty reductions were completed in February 2018, the U.S. Department of State reported that the United States had 1,350 warheads on 652 deployed ICBMs, SLBMs, and heavy bombers, within a total of 800 deployed and nondeployed ICBMs, SLBMs, and heavy bombers.[28] It updated these totals on September 1, 2020, at which time the United States had 1,457 warheads on 675 deployed ICBMs, SLBMs, and heavy bombers, within a total of 800 deployed and nondeployed ICBMs, SLBMs, and heavy bombers.[29] These totals likely exclude one or two Ohio-class submarines that undergoing short-term maintenance; if these were counted in the active force, the number of deployed launchers and deployed warheads is likely reach the New START limits of 700 and 1,550, respectively.

The 2018 Nuclear Posture Review reaffirmed the U.S. commitment to the nuclear triad and to the modernization programs for each of the components of that force structure. It noted that "the triad's synergy and overlapping attributes help ensure the enduring survivability of our deterrence capabilities against attack and our capacity to hold a range of adversary targets at risk throughout a crisis or conflict. Eliminating any leg of the triad would greatly ease adversary attack planning and allow an adversary to concentrate resources and attention on defeating the remaining two legs."[30]

The Biden Administration announced, on January 21, 2021, that the United States and Russia would extend the 2010 New START Treaty by five years, as permitted in the treaty, through February 5, 2026. The two nations exchanged the necessary documents to complete this extension on February 3, 2021. The force structure data included in the first data exchange after the extension appears on **Table 2**, above. Although the nuclear posture review has not yet been completed, Secretary of Defense Lloyd Austin and Deputy Secretary of Defense Kath Hicks both voiced their support for the nuclear triad during their confirmation hearings in January and February 2021. Moreover, as noted above, the Administration has also included funding for each of the ongoing nuclear modernization programs in the FY2022 budget request.

---

[27] U.S. Department of Defense, *Report on Plan to Implement the Nuclear Force Reductions, Limitations, and Verification*, Washington, DC, April 8, 2014.

[28] U.S. Department of State, Bureau of State, Bureau of Arms Control, Verification, and Compliance, New START Treaty Aggregate Numbers of Strategic Offensive Forces, Fact Sheet, Washington, DC, https://www.state.gov/t/avc/newstart/278775.htm.

[29] U.S. Department of State, Bureau of State, Bureau of Arms Control, Verification, and Compliance, New START Treaty Aggregate Numbers of Strategic Offensive Forces, Fact Sheet, Washington, DC, https://www.state.gov/new-start-treaty-aggregate-numbers-of-strategic-offensive-arms-15/.

[30] Ibid., p. 43.

Strategic Nuclear Delivery Vehicles: Post-Cold War Reductions and Current Modernization Programs

Intercontinental Ballistic Missiles (ICBMs)

Peacekeeper (MX)

In the late 1980s, the United States deployed 50 Peacekeeper ICBMs, each with 10 warheads, at silos that had held Minuteman missiles at F.E. Warren Air Force Base in Wyoming. The 1993 START II Treaty would have banned multiple warhead ICBMs, so the United States would have had to eliminate these missiles while implementing the treaty. Therefore, the Pentagon began planning for their elimination, and the Air Force added funds to its budget for this purpose in 1994. However, beginning in FY1998, Congress prohibited the Clinton Administration from spending any money on the deactivation or retirement of these missiles until START II entered into force. The Bush Administration requested $14 million in FY2002 to begin the missiles' retirement; Congress lifted the restriction and authorized the funding. The Air Force began to deactivate the missiles in October 2002, and completed the process, having removed all the missiles from their silos, in September 2005. The MK21 reentry vehicles and W87 warheads from these missiles were placed in storage. As is noted below, the Air Force redeployed some of these warheads and reentry vehicles on Minuteman III missiles, under the Safety Enhanced Reentry Vehicle (SERV) program.

Under the terms of the original, 1991 START Treaty, the United States would have had to eliminate the Peacekeeper missile silos to remove the warheads on the missiles from accountability under the treaty limits. However, the Air Force retained the silos as it deactivated the missiles. Therefore, the warheads that were deployed on the Peacekeeper missiles still counted under START, even though the missiles were no longer operational, until START expired in December 2009. The United States did not, however, count any of these warheads under the limits in the Moscow Treaty. The United States has eliminated the empty launchers so that they do not count under the New START Treaty, although it did not have to blow up or excavate the silos, as it would have had to do under the original START Treaty. The Air Force filled the silos with gravel, and completed the elimination process in February 2015.

Minuteman III

The U.S. Minuteman III ICBMs are located at three Air Force bases—F.E. Warren AFB in Wyoming, Malmstrom AFB in Montana, and Minot AFB in North Dakota. Each base supports 150 missile silos, but only 400 of the 450 silos currently hold operational missiles.

Force Structure Changes

In the 2006 Quadrennial Defense Review (QDR), the Pentagon indicated that it planned to "reduce the number of deployed Minuteman III ballistic missiles from 500 to 450, beginning in Fiscal Year 2007."[31] The Air Force deactivated the missiles in Malmstrom's 564th Missile Squadron, which was known as the "odd squad."[32] This designation reflected that the launch control facilities for these missiles used a different communications and launch control system

[31] Department of Defense. Report of the 2006 Quadrennial Defense Review. Washington, DC. February 2006. p. 50.

[32] Johnson, Peter. Growth Worries Base Boosters. *Great Falls Tribune*. January 19, 2006.

than all the other Minuteman missiles. According to Air Force Space Command, the drawdown began on July 1, 2007. All of the reentry vehicles were removed from the missiles in early 2008, the missiles were all removed from their silos by the end of July 2008, and the squadron was deactivated by the end of August 2008.[33]

In testimony before the Senate Armed Services Committee, General Cartwright, then the commander of U.S. Strategic Command (STRATCOM), stated that the retired missiles could serve as test assets for the remaining force, as the Air Force had to "keep a robust test program all the way through the life of the program."[34] Without these added test assets, the test program could have started to run short around 2017 or 2018, but the added missiles would likely support the program through 2025 or longer. When the Air Force retired these missiles, it indicated that it would not destroy or eliminate the silos. However, with the signing of the New START Treaty in 2010, these silos added to the U.S. total of nondeployed ICBM launchers. Consequently, the Air Force filled them with gravel in 2014 so that the United States could comply with the New START limits by 2018.

Some in Congress questioned the Administration's rationale for the plan to retire 50 Minuteman missiles, indicating that they believed that more Minuteman silos increased U.S. security and strengthened deterrence. Congress addressed this again after the United States signed the New START Treaty, when the Obama Administration considered further reducing the ICBM force from 450 to 400 deployed missiles. In 2012 and 2013, Congress sought to prevent the Obama Administration from conducting an environmental assessment needed to advise the elimination of up to 50 silos. The House Armed Services Committee included a provision in its version of the FY2015 National Defense Authorization Act (H.R. 4435, §1634) that would require the Air Force to retain all 450 ICBM silos "in warm status" regardless of future force structure requirements, budgets, or arms control limits, through 2015.[35] Congress has also adopted language that would preclude further reductions in the numbers of deployed ICBMs. For example, Section 1667 of the National Defense Authorization Act for FY2017 (P.L. 114-328) stated that none of the FY2017 funds could be obligated or expended for reducing the quantity of deployed intercontinental ballistic missiles of the United States to a number less than 400.

Congress has included language precluding further reductions in the U.S. ICBM force in every subsequent NDAA, as some Members continue to debate about the necessity for and numbers of U.S. land-based missiles. As is noted below, questions about the relationship between deterrence and the numbers of deployed ICBMs are central to the debate over the new Ground-based Strategic Deterrent missile.

The Obama Administration announced, in its April 2014 report on its planned force structure under New START, that the Air Force would to retain 400 deployed Minuteman III ICBMs, within a total force of 450 deployed and nondeployed launchers. This option has allowed the Air Force to deactivate missiles in silos that have been damaged by water intrusion, repair those silos, and return missiles to them at a later date while it repaired additional silos.[36] According to the

[33] Global Security Newswire. U.S. Deactivates 50 Strategic Missiles. August 4, 2008.

[34] U.S. Senate, Committee on Armed Services, Hearing on Global Strike Plans and Programs. Testimony of James E. Cartwright, Commander U.S. Strategic Command. March 29, 2006.

[35] The legislation indicated that "warm status" would enable a "silo to—(1) remain a fully functioning element of the interconnected and redundant command and control system of the missile field; and (2) be made fully operational with a deployed missile."

[36] Gabe Starosta, "On New START, Timing Begins to Limit Force-Structure Alternatives," *InsideDefense.com*, May 14, 2013.

data exchanged under the New START Treaty, the Air Force had completed the reductions in deployed missiles by early June 2017. It now has 400 silos loaded with operational missiles and 50 empty silos that count as "nondeployed" under New START.[37]

The Air Force has continued to conduct flight tests of the Minuteman III missiles. The live launches use missiles pulled from operational wings at Minot Air Force Base and Malmstrom Air Force Base. During these tests, the missiles fly from Vandenberg Air Force Base in California and deliver a single unarmed warhead to an impact point 4,200 miles (6,759 km) away in the Kwajalein Atoll in the Pacific Ocean.[38] While most occur without incident, the Air Force terminated a test in late July 2018 due to an unspecified "anomaly."[39] In addition, a test planned for May 2021 failed after the missile "experienced a ground abort prior to launch."[40]

Warhead Plans

Each Minuteman III missile was initially deployed with 3 warheads, for a total of 1,500 warheads across the force. In 2001, to meet the START limit of 6,000 warheads, the United States removed 2 warheads from each of the 150 Minuteman missiles at F.E. Warren AFB,[41] reducing the Minuteman III force to 1,200 total warheads. In the process, the Air Force also removed and destroyed the "bulkhead," the platform on the reentry vehicle, so that, in accordance with START rules, these missiles can no longer carry three warheads.

Under START II, the United States would have had to download all the Minuteman III missiles to one warhead each. Although the Bush Administration initially endorsed the plan to download all Minuteman ICBMs, this plan apparently changed. In testimony before the Senate Armed Services Committee in 2006, General Cartwright, who was then the Commander of STRATCOM, indicated that some Minuteman missiles might carry more than one warhead. Specifically, when discussing the reduction from 500 to 450 missiles, he said, "this is not a reduction in the number of warheads deployed. They will just merely be re-distributed on the missiles."[42] Major General Deppe confirmed that the Air Force would retain some Minuteman III missiles with more than one warhead when he noted, in a speech in mid-April 2007, that the remaining 450 Minuteman III missiles could be deployed with one, two, or three warheads.[43]

In the 2010 NPR, the Obama Administration indicated that, under the New START Treaty, all of the U.S. Minuteman III missiles would carry only one warhead. It indicated that this configuration would "enhance the stability of the nuclear balance by reducing incentives for either side to strike first."[44] The Air Force completed the downloading process, leaving all

---

[37] Captain Esther Willet, 90th Missile Wing Public Affairs, "AF Meets New START Treaty Requirements," June 28, 2017, http://www.afgsc.af.mil/News/Article-Display/Article/1234307/af-meets-new-start-requirements/.

[38] Hans M. Kristensen and Robert S. Norris, "U.S. Nuclear Forces, 2017," *Bulletin of the Atomic Scientists*, January 2017, http://www.tandfonline.com/doi/full/10.1080/00963402.2016.1264213.

[39] "Unarmed US missile test flight terminated due to anomaly," *Defense News*, July 31, 2018. https://www.defensenews.com/space/2018/07/31/unarmed-us-missile-test-flight-terminated-due-to-anomaly/.

[40] Oriana Pawlyk, "Air Force Aborts ICBM Test After Problem on the Ground," *Military Times*, May 5, 2021. https://www.military.com/daily-news/2021/05/05/air-force-aborts-icbm-test-after-problem-ground.html

[41] See Robert S. Norris and Hans M. Kristensen. U.S. Nuclear Forces, 2016. Bulletin of the Atomic Scientists. January/February 2006.

[42] See, U.S. Senate, Committee on Armed Services, Hearing on Global Strike Plans and Programs. Testimony of James E. Cartwright, Commander U.S. Strategic Command. March 29, 2006.

[43] Sirak, Michael. Air Force Prepared To Draw Down Minuteman III Fleet by 50 Missiles. Defense Daily. April 17, 2007.

[44] Single-warhead ICBMs are considered to be stabilizing because it would take two attacking warheads to destroy the

Minuteman III missiles with a single warhead, on June 16, 2014.[45] The 2018 Nuclear Posture Review reaffirmed this deployment, with each Minuteman III missile deployed with one warhead under the New START Treaty.

Unlike under START, the United States did not have to alter the front end of the missile or remove the old bulkhead. As a result, the United States could restore warheads to its ICBM force if the international security environment changed. Moreover, this plan could have changed, if, in an effort to reduce the cost of the ICBM force under New START, the Obama Administration had decided to reduce the number of Minuteman III missiles further in the coming years. Reports indicate that the Pentagon may have reviewed such an option as a part of its NPR implementation study, but, as the report released on April 8, 2014, indicated, it did not decide to pursue this approach. As a result, under New START, each of the 400 deployed Minuteman III missiles now carries a single warhead.[46]

Minuteman Modernization Programs

Over the past 20 years, the Air Force pursued several programs that were designed to improve the accuracy and reliability of the Minuteman fleet and to "support the operational capability of the Minuteman ICBM through 2030." According to some estimates, this effort has cost $6 billion-$7 billion.[47] This section describes several of the key programs in this effort.

Propulsion Replacement Program (PRP)

This program, which began in 1998, replaced the propellant, the solid rocket fuel, in the Minuteman motors to extend the life of the rocket motors. A consortium led by Northrup Grumman poured the new fuel into the first and second stages and remanufactured the third stages of the missiles. According to the Air Force, as of early August, 2007, 325 missiles, or 72% of the fleet, had completed the PRP program; this number increased to around 80% by mid-2008. The Air Force purchased the final 56 booster sets, for a total of 601, with its funding in FY2008. Funding in FY2009 supported the assembly of the remaining boosters. The Air Force completed the PRP program in 2013.[48] In the FY2007 Defense Authorization Act (P.L. 109-364) and the FY2007 Defense Appropriations Act (P.L. 109-289), the 109th Congress indicated that it would not support efforts to end this program early. However, in its budget request for FY2010, the Air Force indicated that FY2009 was the last year for funding for the program, as the program was nearing completion.

Guidance Replacement Program (GRP)

The Guidance Replacement Program extended the service life of the Minuteman missiles' guidance set, and improved the maintainability and reliability of guidance sets. It replaced aging

silo. If each side has approximately the same number of warheads, than an attack on a single warhead missile would cost more warheads than it would kill, and, therefore, would not be considered to be lucrative.

[45] Jenn Rowell, "Last Malmstron ICBM Reconfigured Under Treaty," *Great Falls Tribune*, June 18, 2014.

[46] Department of Defense, *Nuclear Posture Review*, Washington, DC, February 2, 2018, p. 45, https://media.defense.gov/2018/Feb/02/2001872886/-1/-1/1/2018-NUCLEAR-POSTURE-REVIEW-FINAL-REPORT.PDF.

[47] Robert S. Norris and Hans M. Kristensen. U.S. Nuclear Forces, 2006. Bulletin of the Atomic Scientists. January/February 2006.

[48] Sirak, Michael. Minuteman Fleet has Life Beyond 2020, Says Senior Air Force Space Official. Defense Daily. June 14, 2006.

parts with more modern and reliable technologies, while maintaining the accuracy of the missiles.[49] Flight testing for the new system began in 1998, and, at the time, it exceeded its operational requirements. Production began in 2000, and the Air Force purchased 652 of the new guidance units. Press reports indicate that the system had some problems with accuracy during its testing program.[50] The Air Force eventually identified and corrected the problems in 2002 and 2003. According to the Air Force, 425 Minuteman III missiles were upgraded with the new guidance packages as of early August 2007. The Air Force had been taking delivery of 5 to 7 new guidance units each month, for a total of 652 units. Boeing reported that it had delivered the final guidance set in early February 2009. The Air Force did not request any additional funding for this program in FY2010. However, it did request $1.2 million in FY2011 and $0.6 million in FY2012 to complete the program. It has not requested additional funding in subsequent years.

Propulsion System Rocket Engine Program (PSRE)

According to the Air Force, the Propulsion System Rocket Engine (PSRE) program was designed to rebuild and replace Minuteman postboost propulsion system components that were produced in the 1970s. The Air Force replaced, rather than repaired this system because original replacement parts, materials, and components were no longer available. This program was designed to reduce the life-cycle costs of the Minuteman missiles and maintain their reliability through 2020. The Air Force planned to purchase a total of 574 units for this program. Through FY2009, the Air Force had purchased 441 units, at a cost of $128 million. It requested an additional $26.2 million to purchase another 96 units in FY2010 and $21.5 million to purchase 37 units in FY2011. This completed the purchase of the units. As a result, the budget for FY2012 did not support the purchase of any additional units, but included $26.1 million for continuing work installing the units. The FY2013 budget request contained $10.8 million for the same purpose. The Air Force has not requested additional funding in subsequent years.

Rapid Execution and Combat Targeting (REACT) Service Life Extension Program

The REACT targeting system was first installed in Minuteman launch control centers in the mid-1990s. This technology allowed for a significant reduction in the amount of time it would take to retarget the missiles, automated routine functions to reduce the workload for the crews, and replaced obsolete equipment.[51] In 2006, the Air Force began to deploy a modernized version of this system to extend its service life and to update the command and control capability of the launch control centers. This program will allow for more rapid retargeting of ICBMs, a capability identified in the Nuclear Posture Review as essential to the future nuclear force. The Air Force completed this effort in late 2006.

Safety Enhanced Reentry Vehicle (SERV)

As was noted above, under the SERV program, the Air Force planned to deploy MK21/W-87 reentry vehicles removed from Peacekeeper ICBMs on the Minuteman missiles, replacing the older MK12/W62 and MK12A/W78 reentry vehicles. To do this, the Air Force modified the software, changed the mounting on the missile, and changed the support equipment. According to Air Force Space Command, the SERV program conducted three flight tests in 2005 and cancelled

[49] LGM Minuteman III Modernization. Globalsecurity.org.

[50] Donnelly, John M. Air Force Defends Spending Half A Billion on Iffy ICBMs. *Defense Week*. September 10, 2001. p. 1.

[51] LGM Minuteman III Modernization. Globalsecurity.org.

a fourth test because the first three were so successful.[52] The Air Force installed 20 of the kits for the new reentry vehicles on the Minuteman missiles at F.E. Warren Air Force Base in 2006. The process began at Malmstrom in July 2007 and at Minot in July 2008. The Air Force purchased an additional 111 modification kits in FY2009, for a total of 570 kits. This was the last year that it planned to request funding for the program. It completed the installation process by 2012.

This program is expected to ensure the reliability and effectiveness of the Minuteman III missiles throughout their planned deployments. The W-87 warheads entered the U.S. arsenal in 1986 and were refurbished in 2005. This process extended their service life past 2025.[53] As noted below, the National Nuclear Security Administration (NNSA) has initiated a life extension program for the W78 warhead, now known as the W87-1, to outfit the new Ground-based Strategic Deterrent (GBSD) that will replace the Minuteman III missile after 2030.

Solid Rocket Motor Warm Line Program

In the FY2009 Omnibus Appropriations Bill, Congress approved a new program known as the Solid Rocket Motor Warm Line Program. According to Air Force budget documents, this program was intended to "sustain and maintain the unique manufacturing and engineering infrastructure necessary to preserve the Minuteman III solid rocket motor production capability" by providing funding to maintain a low rate of production of motors each year.[54] The program received $42.9 million in FY2010 and produced motors for four Minuteman ICBMs. DOD requested $44.2 million to produce motors for three additional ICBMs in FY2011. The budget request for FY2012 includes an additional $34 million to complete work on the motors purchased in prior years. The FY2013 budget did not contain any additional funding for this program area, although the Air Force continues to support the solid rocket motor production base with work funded through its Dem/Val program (described below).

ICBM Fuze Modernization

According to Air Force budget documents, the ICBM fuze modernization program "is developing a form, fit and functionally equivalent replacement for the MK21 fuze" and will provide a "30-year objective design life." The Air Force notes that the "legacy Mk21 fuze is three times past its design life" and it cannot meet the requirements for the nuclear weapons stockpile. The budget documents also indicate that the MK21 reentry vehicles and the new fuzes will be deployed on both the current Minuteman III (MM III) and future Ground Based Strategic Deterrent (GBSD) missile. The budget documents also indicate that this program "will leverage technologies, parts, components and development/production capabilities resulting from extensive fuze work performed by the US Navy and NNSA during work on the W88 warhead deployed on Trident II (D-5) missiles."

The ICBM fuze modernization program has grown in recent years, from $57.9 million in FY2015 to $142 million in FY2016, $189.8 million in FY2017, $179 million in FY2018, and $172.9 million in FY2019. The Air Force requested, and Congress authorized, $161.2 million for FY2020 (P.L. 116-92). The Air Force budget documents for FY2020 show that the Air Force planned to fund the program at $133 million in FY2021, with the program then decreasing to $60

[52] Lt. Gen. Frank G. Klotz, Vice Commander, Air Force Space Command. Transcript of Speech to the National Defense University Breakfast. June 13, 2006.

[53] Tom Collina, *Fact Sheet: U.S. Nuclear Modernization*, Arms Control Association, Washington, DC, January 5, 2009, http://www.armscontrol.org/USNuclearModernization.

[54] http://www.saffm.hq.af.mil/shared/media/document/AFD-100128-067.pdf.

million in FY2022 and $2 million in FY2023 and FY2024. However, in October 2019, the Air Force indicated that the program would face delays due to technical issues with the systems capacitors.[55] Consequently, in its budget request for FY2021, the Air Force indicated that the program required a "rebaseline due to capacitor redesign issues and funding limitations in FY19 and FY20." It requested $167 million for FY2021 and, following the rebaselining and a completed design review, the Air Force requested $129.7 million for the ICBM Fuze Modernization Program in FY2022.

ICBM Dem/Val Program

The Air Force has also funded, through its RDT&E budget, a number of programs under the ICBM Dem/Val (demonstration and validation) title that are expected to allow it to mature technologies that might support both the existing Minuteman fleet and the future GBSD program. Congress appropriated $72.9 million for these programs in FY2014, $30.9 million in FY2015, $39.8 million in FY2016, and 108.7 million for FY2017.

With the FY2017 budget request, the Air Force moved this program element into the program element for the GBSD. Hence, although these projects are designed to support both the Minuteman force and the future GBSD force, they will likely begin to focus more specifically on the needs of the new missile. In its FY2018 budget request, the Air Force sought only $10.7 million for the Dem/Val program. This represented a significant reduction from the FY2017 level and from the FY2018 funding anticipated in the FY2017 budget documents. The Air Force noted, in its FY2018 budget documents, that the FY2018 funding "reflected a realignment of $61.868M to higher Air Force priorities." When asked about this realignment, Air Force Vice Chief of Staff General Stephen Wilson noted that it was not a sign of waning support for the nuclear weapons modernization programs in the Air Force, but was specific to issues affecting only that program.[56] The Air Force requested $41.9 million for this program area in the FY2019 budget; Congress provided $32.3 million. The Air Force requested $44 million for this program area in FY2020; Congress provided this amount in the FY2020 National Defense Authorization Act (P.L. 116-92). The Air Force requested, and Congress authorized, $33 million for this program area in its FY2021 budget.

The Air Force has requested $49.6 million for the Dem/Val program in its FY2022 budget request, a reduction from the $55 million anticipated for FY2022 in the FY2021 budget request. The FY2022 budget documents indicate that this "reflects a $5 million reduction for higher Air Force priorities."

The projects funded through the Dem/Val program area include ICBM guidance applications, ICBM propulsion applications, reentry vehicle applications, and command and control applications. In the area of guidance applications, DOD is seeking to "identify, develop, analyze, and evaluate advanced strategic guidance technologies, such as a new solid-state guidance system, for the ICBM fleet."[57] This new system would increase the accuracy of the ICBM force and allow the missiles to destroy hardened targets with a single warhead. However, recent press

[55] This is the same capacitor that, as described below, is likely to cause delays in the W88-Alt and B61-12 warhead life extension programs. Sara Sirota, "NNSA technical issues cause rebaselining of $2 billion ICBM fuze modernization program," *Inside Defense*, October 24, 2019.

[56] Rachal Karas, "Air Force Moving Money From B61, ICBM Upgrades to Fund 'Higher Priorities,'" *Inside Defense*, May 26, 2017.

[57] Elaine Grossman, "Key Targeting Tech for Future U.S. Nuclear Missile has Gone Unfunded," *Nextgov.com*, August 19, 2014. http://www.thedailybeast.com/articles/2016/02/17/top-secret-u-s-nuke-war-plans-thwarted.html.

reports question whether this program is meeting the needs outlined by the Air Force and whether it will produce guidance technologies that can provide the needed increases in ICBM accuracy.[58]

In the area of propulsion applications, DOD is, among other things, "exploring improvements and/or alternatives to current propulsion systems." This program area is specifically seeking to support the solid rocket motor research and development industrial base, so that it will have the capacity to support the ICBM force when the Air Force begins the procurement of its new ground-based strategic deterrent. In the area of reentry vehicle applications, DOD is seeking to both support reentry systems beyond their original design life and develop and test advanced technologies to meet future requirements. The area of command and control applications "evaluates and develops assured, survivable, and secure communications and battlespace awareness." It is focusing on both skills and technologies needed to meet current and future requirements.

Ground-Based Strategic Deterrent (GBSD)

In 2002, the Air Force began to explore its options for a new missile to replace the Minuteman III, with the intent to begin deploying a new missile in 2018. It reportedly produced a "mission needs statement" at that time, and then began an Analysis of Alternatives (AOA) in 2004.[59] In June 2006, General Frank Klotz indicated that, after completing the AOA, Air Force Space Command had decided to recommend "an evolutionary approach to the replacement of the Minuteman III capability,"[60] which would continue to modernize the components of the existing missiles rather than begin from scratch to develop and produce new missiles. He indicated that Space Command supported this approach because it would be less costly than designing a new system "from scratch."

With this plan in place, the Air Force began examining the investments that might be needed to sustain the Minuteman force through 2030. According to General Robert Kehler, then Commander-in-Chief of STRATCOM, the missile should be viable throughout that time.[61] In addition, according to DOD officials, flight tests and surveillance programs should provide the Air Force with "better estimates for component age-out and system end-of-life timelines."[62]

At the same time, the Air Force began to consider what a follow-on system to the Minuteman III might look like for the timeframe after 2030. The Air Force began a capabilities-based assessment of its land-based deterrent in early 2011 and began a new Analysis of Alternatives (AOA) for the ICBM force in 2012 with completion expected in mid-2014.[63] According to the Air Force, it requested $2.6 million to begin the study in the FY2012 budget. The FY2013 budget request

[58] Elaine M. Grossman, "Top Secret U.S., Nuke War Plans Thwarted," *The Daily Beast*, February 17, 2016.

[59] Selinger, Mark. Minuteman Replacement Study Expected to Begin Soon. Aerospace Daily and Defense Report. June 25, 2004.

[60] Lt. Gen. Frank G. Klotz, Vice Commander, Air Force Space Command. Transcript of Speech to the National Defense University Breakfast. June 13, 2006.

[61] Jason Simpson, "Kehler: Air Force Investigating Minuteman III Follow-On System," *Inside the Air Force*, October 8, 2009. See, also, Jason Simpson, "Testers See no Problems With Minuteman III Missiles Lasting to 2030," *Inside the Air Force*, September 4, 2009.

[62] See the prepared statement of Assistant Secretary of Defense Madelyn Creedon, U.S. Congress, House Armed Forces, Strategic Forces, Hearing on the Proposed Fiscal 2014 Defense Authorization as it Relates to Atomic Energy Defense Activities. 113th Cong., 1st sess., May 9. 2013.

[63] Department of Defense, *November 2010 Update to the National Defense Authorization Act of FY2010*, New START Treaty Framework and Nuclear Force Structure Plans, Washington, DC, November 17, 2010, p. 11, http://www.lasg.org/CMRR/Sect1251_update_17Nov2010.pdf.

included $11.7 million for a new project area known as Ground-based Strategic Deterrence (GBSD). The FY2014 budget request included $9.4 million to continue this study.

In early January 2013, the Air Force Nuclear Weapons Center issued a "Broad Agency Announcement (BAA)" seeking white papers for concepts "that address modernization or replacement of the ground-based leg of the nuclear triad." The papers produced as a part of this study served as an early evaluation of alternatives for the future of the ICBM force, and may have helped select those concepts that would be included in the formal Analysis of Alternatives. The Air Force Nuclear Weapons Center created five possible paths for further analysis, including one that would continue to use the current Minuteman III baseline until 2075 without seeking to close gaps in the missiles' capabilities, one that would incorporate incremental changes into the current Minuteman III system to close gaps in capabilities, one that would design a new, fixed ICBM system to replace the Minuteman III, one that would design a new mobile ICBM system, and one that would design a new tunnel-based system.

Some analysts expressed surprise at the possibility that the Air Force would consider deploying a new ICBM on mobile launchers or in tunnels. During the Cold War, the Air Force considered these types of deployment concepts as a way to increase the survivability of the ICBM force when faced with the possibility of an attack with hundreds, or thousands, of Soviet warheads. Even during the Cold War, these concepts proved to be very expensive and impractical, and they were dropped from consideration after the demise of the Soviet Union and in the face of deep reductions in the numbers of U.S. and Russian warheads. Some analysts saw the Air Force's possible renewed interest in these concepts as a step backward; they argued that the United States should consider retiring its ICBM force, and should not consider new, expensive schemes to increase the missiles' capabilities. Others, however, noted that the presence of these concepts in the study did not mean that the Air Force would move in this direction. They noted that the 2010 NPR mentioned the possibility of mobile basing for ICBMs as a way to increase warning and decision time, so it should not be a surprise to see requests for further study. Nevertheless, the cost and complexity of mobile ICBM basing, again, eliminated these concepts from further consideration.

According to press reports, the Air Force completed the AOA in 2014. The Air Force had reportedly decided to pursue a "hybrid" plan that would maintain the basic design of the missile, the current communications system, and the existing launch silos, but would replace the rocket motors, guidance sets, postboost vehicles, and reentry systems. However, the Air Force has since indicated that the GBSD program "will replace the entire flight system, retaining the silo basing mode while recapitalizing the ground facilities."

The Air Force received $75 million for the GBSD program in FY2016 and an additional $113 million for FY2017. It requested $215.7 million for FY2018, a reduction from the $294 million for FY2018 expected in the FY2017 budget documents. The Air Force noted that this reduction of $78.2 million occurred to align the program with an Independent Cost Estimate conducted by DOD. Congress authorized $215.7 million for the GBSD in the National Defense Authorization Act for 2018 (P.L. 115-91). The Defense Authorization Act for 2017 (P.L. 114-328) also included a provision stating that none funds available in FY2017 or FY2018 could be "obligated or expended to retain the option for, or develop, a mobile variant of the ground-based strategic deterrent missile." The NDAA for 2018 extended this prohibition through FY2019; the NDAA for FY2019 (P.L. 115-232) extended this prohibition through 2020.

The Air Force requested $345 million for the GBSD program in FY2019. In the National Defense Authorization Act for Fiscal Year 2019 (P.L. 115-232), Congress added $69.4 million, for a total authorization of $414.4 million for the GBSD program. The conference report (H.Rept. 115-874) did not provide a rationale for this increase, although the report from the Senate Armed Services

Committee (S.Rept. 115-262) did note that the program was ahead of schedule and that the committee "strongly supports the GBSD program as an integral part of the nuclear modernization effort." The conference report also required that the Under Secretary of Defense for Acquisition and Sustainment, in consultation with the Secretary of the Air Force, develop and implement "a plan to accelerate the development, procurement, and fielding" of the GBSD program. It noted that the plan should account for the "recapitalization of the full intercontinental ballistic missile weapon system for 400 deployed missiles and associated spares and 450 launch facilities."

The Air Force requested $570.3 million of the GBSD program in its budget for FY2020, consistent with the expected funding level identified in FY2019. Congress approved funding of $552.4 million in the FY2020 National Defense Authorization Act (P.L. 116-92). The conference report also included a provision, in Section 1671, mandating that the Secretary of Defense submit a report to Congress that assesses "the risks and costs resulting from receiving only one bid" for the engineering and manufacturing development phase of the GBSD program. This provision responds to concerns about the potential for an increase in the cost of the program after Boeing withdrew and left Northrop Grumman as the only company competing for the GBSD contract.[64]

The Air Force requested $1.52 billion for the GBSD program in its FY2021 budget; Congress authorized $1.5 billion. The Air Force FY2021 budget documents showed that the funding would continue to increase, growing to $2.5 billion in 2022 and $3 per year between 2023 and 2025. According to the Air Force, these increases are "required for FY21 and beyond" to execute the Engineering & Manufacturing Development phase of the program. The Air Force has requested $2.55 billion for the GBSD program in FY2022. According to the Air Force budget documents, the significant funding increase for FY2022 is required "to execute the Engineering & Manufacturing Development (EMD) Contract to advance GBSD major activities."

The Air Force has indicated that is seeking to deliver "an integrated flight system" beginning in FY2029, with booster production beginning in FY2026. In FY2017, the Air Force awarded two contracts—one to Northrop Grumman and one to Boeing—for the Technology Maturation and Risk Reduction (TMRR) phase of the program, which ran through FY2020. The goals of this phase were for the contractors to deliver the preliminary design of a "modular, integrated weapon system" and to "mature technologies related to the major activities and demonstrate performance of sub-system capabilities through prototyping, modeling, and simulation." In early September 2020, the Air Force awarded a contract for $13.3 billion to Northrup Grumman to begin the Engineering and Manufacturing Development phase of the GBSD program.[65]

According to press reports, the Air Force estimated, in 2015, that the program would cost a total of $62.3 billion, in then-year dollars, over 30 years. This included $48.5 billion for the acquisition of 642 missiles, $6.9 billion for command and control systems, and $6.9 billion to renovate the launch control centers.[66] The 642 missiles would support testing and deployment of a force of 400

[64] Valerie Insinna, "Boeing could be out of the Air Force's competition for next-gen ICBMs for good," *Defense News*, October, 21, 2019, https://www.defensenews.com/smr/nuclear-arsenal/2019/10/22/boeing-could-be-out-of-the-air-forces-competition-for-next-gen-icbms-for-good/. See, also, Joe Gould, "House Armed Services chairman takes aim at Air Force's handling of ICBM replacement program," *Defense News*, October 24, 2019, https://www.defensenews.com/congress/2019/10/24/hasc-chair-takes-aim-at-air-forces-handling-of-icbm-replacement-program/?utm_source=Sailthru&utm_medium=email&utm_campaign=EBB%2010.25.19&utm_term=Editorial%20-%20Early%20Bird%20Brief.

[65] Robert Burns, "Air Force awards $13.3 billion contract for nuclear missiles," *Associated Press*, September 8, 2020, https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/national-security/air-force-awards-133-billion-contract-for-nuclear-missiles/2020/09/08/e0167fb2-f22a-11ea-8025-5d3489768ac8_story.html.

[66] Kingston Reif, "Air Force Drafts Plan for Follow-on ICBM," *Arms Control Today*, July/August 2015.

missiles. Recent reports indicate that the Pentagon's Cost Analysis and Program Evaluation Office (CAPE) estimated that the program would cost $85 billion over that time, with $22.6 billion for research and development, $61.5 billion for procurement, and $718 million for related military construction.[67] The Air Force indicated that the $23 billion difference in estimates was due to the fact that CAPE used different assumptions and a different methodology in its analysis, in part, because the United States has not designed and produced long-range missiles in decades.

Normally, DOD would require that the Air Force and CAPE agree on a cost estimate before the program could proceed, but this was not the case with the GBSD. Deborah Lee James, the Secretary of the Air Force at the end of the Obama Administration, indicated that it could take a year or more to refine cost estimates, based on the submissions received by defense industry as they bid on the program.[68] Press reports indicate that, after further analysis, the Air Force and CAPE assessed in mid-2020 that the GBSD program would cost between $93.1 billion and $95.8 billion. This would support the purchase of 659 missiles, with 25 for initial testing and 634 for 400 missiles in silos, spares, and later testing,[69] Press reports indicate that the system could reach its initial operational capacity, with 9 missiles on alert, by 2029 and would complete the deployment with 400 missiles on alert in 2036.[70]

The Air Force also plans to modify and install new command and control systems in all 450 existing launch silos and 45 launch control facilities. Because the Air Force would need to convert an average of one facility per week, it sought, in its FY2021 budget request, to use research, development, test and engineering (RDT&E) and missile procurement funding—rather than military construction funding—to cover the conversion costs. According to the Pentagon, funding this effort through the MilCon budget would require separate budgets and planning, with each of the separate sites planned as its own military construction case. Pentagon officials asserted that it could reduce the risk of delays by combining them together into a single program funded through the RDT&E budget.[71] Congress, however, rejected this request in the FY2021 National Defense Authorization Act, requiring, instead, that the funding remain in the Military Construction budget. Congress did, however, state that the Air Force could request funding with each missile base identified as a single integrated project.

The GBSD missile will employ an "open architecture" so that technologies can be upgraded as needed, through the expected 60-year life of the missile. According to officials at Boeing, this modular, open architecture will help keep down the costs of maintenance and upgrades.[72] Moreover, by designing a completely new system, officials believe the Air Force can acquire a more modern, capable, and flexible system at a lower cost than needed to complete another life extension of the Minuteman III. The new system would be "flexible for a wide range of

[67] Anthony Carpaccio, "America's New Nuclear Armed Missile Could Cost $85 Billion," *Bloomberg News*, September 6, 2016.

[68] Aaron Mehta, "Planned ICBM Replacement To Move Forward Without Consensus," *Defense News*, September 19, 2016, http://www.defensenews.com/articles/james-new-icbm-cost-question-will-not-impact-next-budget.

[69] Anthony Cappacio, "U.S. ICBM to Replace 1970s-Era Minuteman May Cost $111 Billion," *Bloomberg News*, October 1, 2020, https://www.bloomberg.com/news/articles/2020-10-01/pentagon-s-next-generation-icbm-program-may-cost-111-billion.

[70] Brian Bradley, "GBSD Scheduled to Reach IOC in FY'29," *Nuclear Security and Deterrence Monitor*, August 7, 2015.

[71] Aaron Mehta, "DoD seeking legislative help for ICBM replacement construction costs," *Defense News*, September 25, https://www.defensenews.com/smr/nuclear-arsenal/2020/09/25/dod-seeking-legislative-help-for-icbm-replacement-construction-costs/.

[72] Stew Magnuson, "Air Force on a Long Road to Replace Minuteman III," *National Defense*, July 23, 2017.

scenarios" and would have improved performance "against modern, precision-guided missile defenses."[73]

Minuteman III Life Extension as an Alternative to GBSD

Several analysts have suggested that the Air Force delay the GBSD program for several years to reduce the financial pressure on the Pentagon caused by the simultaneous modernization of each leg of the nuclear triad, the nuclear command and control system, and the major modernization of conventional forces. According to the Congressional Budget Office, sustaining the existing nuclear force structure and pursuing the current program of record for modernization could cost $634 billion between FY2021 and FY2030.[74] The Department of Defense, in the 2018 Nuclear Posture Review, estimated that these costs would total around 6%-7% of the Defense Department budget through the 2030s,[75] although, with the current CBO estimates and expected trajectory of the Defense budget, that number could rise to 8% or higher. Although a decision to defer the GBSD program might simply shift costs to later years, some analysts argue that this approach would relieve pressure on the DOD budget in the near term, leaving more funding for the acquisition of conventional weapons, readiness, and other DOD priorities.

Some analysts who support a delay in the GBSD program have suggested that the Air Force combine such a delay with a life-extension program for the Minuteman III missile, thus ensuring that the United States maintains an effective ICBM force until the GBSD program reaches completion.[76] Those who support this alternative point out that Air Force officials testified in 2019 that the missile could be extended one more time.[77] Because the Minuteman III fleet is running short of extra missiles needed for annual tests, those who support this proposal also often suggest that the Air Force reduce the number of deployed missiles, perhaps from 400 to 300, to increase the number of missiles available for testing flights prior to the deployment of the GBSD missile. Moreover, they note that the RAND Corporation, in a study published in 2014, argued that a life extension of the Minuteman III missile would cost less than the program to acquire the GBSD missile.[78]

Some analysts who support a delay in the GBSD program and a life-extension for the Minuteman III missile argue that this delay would also provide the Air Force with time to reconsider whether the Air Force could cancel the GBSD program completely, and maintain the U.S. ICBM fleet with

[73] Sydney Freedberg Jr., "New ICBM Cheaper Than Upgraded Minuteman: Boeing on GBSD," *Breaking Defense*, August 2, 2017.

[74] Congressional Budget Office, *Projected Costs of U.S. Nuclear Forces, 2021-2030*, Washington, DC, May 2021, p. 7, https://www.cbo.gov/system/files/2021-05/57130-Nuclear-Forces.pdf.

[75] Department of Defense, *Nuclear Posture Review Report*, Washington, DC, February 2018, https://media.defense.gov/2018/Feb/02/2001872886/-1/-1/1/2018-NUCLEAR-POSTURE-REVIEW-FINAL-REPORT.PDF.

[76] George Perkovich and Pranay Vaddi, *Proportionate Deterrence: A Model Nuclear Posture Review*, Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, Washington, DC, January 21, 2021, p. 68, https://carnegieendowment.org/files/Perkovich_Vaddi_NPR_full1.pdf.

[77] Union of Concerned Scientists, *Rethinking Land-Based*, Washington, DC, January 2020, p. 18, https://www.ucsusa.org/sites/default/files/2020-06/rethinking-land-based-nuclear-missiles.pdf. See also comments by Representative John Garamendi, in U.S. Congress, House Committee on Armed Services, Subcommittee on Strategic Forces, FY2022 National Defense Authorization Request for Strategic Forces, Hearing, 117th Cong., 1st sess., April 21, 2021.

[78] Lauren Caston, Robert S. Leonard, Christopher A. Mouton, Chad J. R. Ohlandt, Craig Moore, Raymond E. Conley, and Glenn Buchan, *The Future of the US Intercontinental Ballistic Missile Force*, Santa Monica, CA: RAND Corporation, 2014.

a life-extended Minuteman III missile.[79] Some argue that the Air Force studies showing that the Minuteman III life extension would be more expensive than the GBSD were flawed because they began with the assumption that the United States will need a force of 400 missiles through 2075. Thus, they contend the studies not only ignored possible improvements in the threat environment and reduced requirements for ICBMs, but also assumed that the United States would eventually need the GBSD program even if it life-extended the Minuteman III missile. Consequently, some have argued that Congress should mandate a new independent study that included alternative assumptions about future threats and requirements and alternative force options to meet the requirements for land-based missiles.[80]

In recent testimony, General Tim Ray, the Commander of Air Force Global Strike Command, and Admiral Charles Richard, the Commander of U.S. Strategic Command (STRATCOM), disputed these arguments. General Ray noted that the Air Force conducted two studies that compared the costs of the GBSD program and a Minuteman III life-extension program, and concluded that the life-extension program would cost $38 billion more than the GBSD program. He also argued that the GBSD program would be more cost-effective than the life-extension program because it would provide the Air Force with a modern missile with greater capabilities and lower maintenance and sustainment costs.[81] Admiral Richard argued, in testimony before the House and Senate Armed Services Committees, that a Minuteman III life-extension program would not even be possible because the Air Force lacks necessary parts and technologies for a life-extended missile. He also argued that a life-extended Minuteman missile would not have the capacity to meet the ICBM requirements into the future, noting that "you cannot indefinitely life-extend anything and I cannot deter with the leftovers of the Cold War forever."[82]

W87-1 Warhead

The Air Force plans to replace the W78 warhead currently carried by the Minuteman III missile with a new warhead when it deploys the new GBSD missile. The W87-1 warhead is the third and current iteration of this new warhead.

The W78 warhead is the oldest warhead in the U.S. stockpile, dating from 1979. The Obama Administration outlined a plan to replace it with a new warhead, known as the IW1 (Interoperable Warhead-1), which could have been delivered by ICBMs (in place of the W78 warhead) and SLBMs (in place of the W88 warheads). The Obama Administration suspended work on this new warhead in FY2016 and did not request any funding for it in the FY2017 and FY2018 budget requests. In the FY2019 budget request for the National Nuclear Security Administration (NNSA), the Trump Administration requested $53 million to resume research and development activities on the IW1. Congress enacted this amount, but requested a study on the rationale for

[79] Daryl Kimball, "Enough Already: No New ICBMs," *Arms Control Today*, March 2021, https://www.armscontrol.org/act/2021-03/focus/enough-already-no-new-icbms.

[80] Ankit Panda, "We Don't Have Enough Information to Evaluate Arguments for a New ICBM," *Defense One*, May 3, 2021, https://www.defenseone.com/ideas/2021/05/we-dont-have-enough-information-evaluate-arguments-new-icbm/173775/.

[81] Captain Christina Camp, *Global Strike Command commander addresses Congressional committee*, Air Force Global Strike Command Public Affairs, Barksdale, LA, May 14, 2021, https://www.afgsc.af.mil/News/Article-Display/Article/2618198/global-strike-command-commander-addresses-congressional-committee/.

[82] Jacqueline Feldscher, "U.S. urgently needs new nukes to counter Russia, China, admiral says," *Politico*, April 20, 2021. See, also, statement of Admiral Charles Richard, in U.S. Congress, House Committee on Armed Services, Subcommittee on Strategic Forces, FY2022 National Defense Authorization Request for Strategic Forces, Hearing, 117th Cong., 1st sess., April 21, 2021.

and alternatives to the plan to use an interoperable warhead as a part of the W78 life extension program.

During 2018, NNSA dropped the IW1 designator and, instead, pursued a life extension program for just the W78 ICBM warhead. It then designated this program as the W87-1, to reflect the fact that it has a similar primary design to the existing W87 warhead, a warhead also carried by the Minuteman III ICBM. According to a report provided to Congress in late 2018, [NNSA] "is no longer planning for an interoperable warhead program as previously conceived," and no longer plans to "pursue a W78 life-extension program using the existing aeroshell."[83] Instead, the new warhead, like the existing W87 warhead, the warhead will use insensitive high explosives (IHE) that meet Air Force and NNSA safety and security requirements. NNSA expects that the new warhead will cost between $8.6 billion and $14.8 billion, before accounting for the new plutonium pit inside the warhead.

According to the report provided to Congress, "NNSA is currently planning for the W87-1 program to include newly manufactured pits."[84] NNSA currently has only a limited capacity to produce new plutonium pits, with that capacity located at Los Alamos National Laboratory in New Mexico. In May 2018, NNSA announced that would pursue a new approach for plutonium pit production to meet the requirement of producing a minimum of 80 pits per year by 2030, as outlined in the 2018 Nuclear Posture Review. Instead of focusing solely on building capacity at Los Alamos National Laboratory, NNSA decided to "repurpose the Mixed Oxide (MOX) Fuel Fabrication Facility at the Savannah River Site to produce at least 50 pits per year" and to continue work that would allow Los Alamos to produce "no fewer than 30 pits per year."[85] Critics have questioned whether NNSA will be able to meet this schedule, and even those who support the effort note that it will be a challenge.[86] Moreover, NNSA has recently indicated that the schedule for the Savannah River Site will likely slip, with the goal of producing 50 pits per year moving from 2030 to 2032-2035.

NNSA has apparently recognized the possibility that it will not have enough new pits available to support the GBSD deployment schedule with W87-1 warheads. In its budget documents, NNSA has indicated that it plans to complete the first production unit of the W87-1 in FY2030. However, the FY2021 budget documents also note that the W87-0 warhead, which is currently deployed on U.S. ICBMs, will also be "qualified and deployed onto the GBSD." During recent testimony, Dr. Charles Verdon, the acting Administrator of NNSA, confirmed that nearly half the W87-0 warheads on Minuteman III missiles will transition to the GBSD.[87] Thus, the W87-0 warhead would provide the Air Force with an alternative warhead if the W87-1 warhead is delayed.

---

[83] Department of Energy, National Nuclear Security Administration, *W78 Replacement Program (W87-1): Cost Estimates and Use of Insensitive High Explosives*, Washington, DC, December 8, 2018, p. 2, http://www.airforcemag.com/Features/Documents/W78%20Replacement%20Program%20Cost%20Estimates%20IHE.pdf.

[84] Ibid. p. 5.

[85] U.S. Department of Energy, National Nuclear Security Administration, *Plutonium Pit Production*, Fact Sheet, Washington, DC, April 2019, https://www.energy.gov/sites/prod/files/2019/05/f62/2019-05-13-FACTSHEET-plutonium-pits.pdf.

[86] Dan Leone, "NNSA Downplays Study that Says Agency Can't Make 50 Nuke Cores Per Year by 2030 in S.C.," *Nuclear Security and Deterrence Monitor*, April 12, 2019. See, also, Colin Demarest, *The Aiken Standard*, August 28, 2019, https://www.aikenstandard.com/news/going-gangbusters-srns-chief-says-plutonium-work-harkens-back-to/article_a94e8d8a-c995-11e9-8741-2f606f64ed72.html.

[87] U.S. Congress, Senate Committee on Armed Services, Department of Energy and National Nuclear Security Administration on Atomic Energy Defense Activities, Hearing, 117th Cong., 1st sess., June 24, 2021, p. 46, https://www.armed-services.senate.gov/imo/media/doc/21-58_06-24-2021.pdf.

NNSA requested $112 million in FY2020 for the W87-1 warhead modification program. NNSA also requested $420 million in FY2020 to support design activities at Savannah River and begin the modifications needed to produce 50 pits per year at the repurposed facility by 2030. In addition, the Air Force requested $75.6 million for the MK21A Reentry Vehicle Program in FY2020. This program will "design, develop, produce, and deploy an integrated reentry vehicle capable of delivering the W87-1 warhead."

The House, in its version of the FY2020 National Defense Authorization Bill (H.R. 2500), reduced the request for the W87-1 warhead to $53 million and the request for to support design activities at Savannah River to $179 million. The Senate's version of the bill supported the budget requests, and the Congress approved $112 million for the W87-1 modification program and $65.7 million for the MK21A Reentry Vehicle Program in the Conference Report on the FY2020 National Defense Authorization Act (P.L. 116-92). Congress also appropriated $420 million to support design activities at Savannah River.

NNSA requested $541 million W87-1 warhead modification program in FY2021. Congress authorized this funding in the FY2021 National Defense Authorization Act. NNSA has indicated that this increase over the $112 million enacted for the W87-1 in FY2020 reflects a "ramp-up" of activities across all program areas. NNSA also requested $441.9 million to support the design of the new pit facility and plutonium processing at Savannah River. Congress also authorized this funding in the FY2021 National Defense Authorization Act. The Air Force also requested, and Congress authorized, $112.8 million for the MK21A Reentry Vehicle Program in FY2021.

NNSA has requested $691 million for the W87-1 warhead modification program in FY2022. The increases in funding for the W87-1 in FY2021 and FY2022 reflect a "ramp-up" of activities across all program areas. NNSA has also requested $603 million for plutonium operations and the design of the new pit production facility at Savannah River.

Submarine-Launched Ballistic Missiles

The U.S. fleet of ballistic missile submarines consists of 14 Trident (Ohio-class) submarines, each originally equipped to carry 24 Trident missiles. With 2 submarines in overhaul, the operational fleet of 12 submarines currently carries around 1,100 warheads. To comply with the launcher limits in New START, each of the submarines can now carry only 20 missiles. The four empty launch tubes have been removed from accountability under New START after being modified so that they cannot carry or launch missiles. As a result, the 14 submarines count as a total of 280 deployed and nondeployed launchers, with 240 deployed launchers counting on the 12 operational submarines.

By the early 1990s, the United States had completed the deployment of 18 Trident ballistic missile submarines (SSBNs). Each of these submarines was equipped to carry 24 Trident missiles, and each missile could carry up to 8 warheads (either W-76 warheads or the larger W-88 warheads on the Trident II missile). The Navy initially deployed eight of these submarines at Bangor, WA, and all eight were equipped with the older Trident I missile. It then deployed 10 submarines, all equipped with the Trident II missile, at Kings Bay, GA. During the 1994 Nuclear Posture Review, the Clinton Administration decided that the United States would reduce the size of its Trident fleet to 14 submarines, and that 4 of the older submarines would be "backfit" to carry the Trident II missile.

The Bush Administration's 2001 Nuclear Posture Review endorsed the plan to backfit four of the Trident submarines so that all would carry Trident II missiles. It also indicated that, instead of retiring the remaining four submarines, the Navy would convert them to carry conventional weapons, and designated them "guided missile" submarines (SSGNs). The 2010 NPR also

endorsed a force of 14 Trident submarines, although it noted that it might reduce that force to 12 submarines in the latter half of this decade. As was noted above, each submarine will deploy with only 20 missiles to meet the reductions in New START. As a result, the U.S. ballistic missile submarine (SSBN) force may continue to consist of 14 Trident submarines, with 2 in overhaul, through New START implementation.

The SSGN Program

The Navy converted four Trident submarines (the USS *Ohio*, USS *Michigan*, USS *Florida*, and USS *Georgia*) to carry conventional cruise missiles and other conventional weapons. Reports indicate that the conversion process took approximately $1 billion and two years for each of the four submarines. The SSGNs can each carry 154 Tomahawk cruise missiles, along with up to 100 special forces troops and their mini-submarines.[88]

The first two submarines scheduled for this conversion were removed from the nuclear fleet in early 2003. They were slated to receive their engineering overhaul, then to begin the conversion process in 2004.[89] The first to complete the process, the USS *Ohio* returned to service as an SSGN in January 2006[90] and achieved operational status on November 1, 2007. According to the Navy, the *Georgia* was scheduled for deployment in March 2008, and the other submarines were scheduled to reach that status later in the year.[91] According to Admiral Stephen Johnson, the Director of the Navy's Strategic Submarine Program (SSP), all four of the submarines had returned to service by mid-2008, and two were forward-deployed on routine patrols. According to the Navy, these submarines are likely to remain in service through the mid-2020s.

The Backfit Program

As was noted above, both the 1994 and 2001 Nuclear Posture Reviews confirmed that the Navy would backfit four Trident submarines so that they could carry the newer Trident II (D-5) missile. This process not only allowed the Navy to replace the aging C-4 missiles, it also equipped the fleet with a missile that has improved accuracy and a larger payload. With its greater range, it would allow the submarines to operate in a larger area and cover a greater range of targets. These characteristics were valued when the system was designed and the United States sought to enhance its ability to deter the Soviet Union. The Bush Administration believed that the range, payload, and flexibility of the Trident submarines and D-5 missiles remained relevant in an era when the United States may seek to deter or defeat a wider range of adversaries. The Obama Administration has emphasized that, by providing the United States with a secure second strike capability, these submarines enhance strategic stability.

Four of the eight Trident submarines based in Bangor, WA (USS *Alaska*, USS *Nevada*, USS *Henry M. Jackson*, and USS *Alabama*) were a part of the backfit program. The *Alaska* and *Nevada* both began the process in 2001; the *Alaska* completed its backfit and rejoined the fleet in

[88] Connolly, Allison. For Four Subs, Its Good-bye Ballistic Missiles, Hello SEALs. Norfolk Virginia Pilot. December 18, 2004.

[89] Ohio Class SSGN Tactical Trident. GlobalSecurity.org http://www.globalsecurity.org/military/systems/ship/ssgn-726.htm.

[90] First Trident Submarine Converted. Associated Press. January 10, 2006.

[91] U.S. Congress. Senate. Armed Services Committee, Subcommittee on Strategic Forces. Fiscal Year 2008 Strategic Forces Program Budget. Hearing. Prepared statement of Mr. Brian R. Green, Deputy Assistant Secretary of Defense, Strategic Capabilities, p. 6. March 28, 2007. See also, Guided Missile Submarine Ohio Ready for Deployment. Inside the Navy, November 5, 2007.

March 2002 and the *Nevada* did the same in August 2002. During the process, the submarines underwent a preplanned engineered refueling overhaul, which accomplishes a number of maintenance objectives, including refueling of the reactor, repairing and upgrading some equipment, replacing obsolete equipment, repairing or upgrading the ballistic missile systems, and other minor alterations.[92] The submarines also are fit with the Trident II missiles and the operating systems that are unique to these missiles. According to the Navy, both of these efforts came in ahead of schedule and under budget. The *Henry M. Jackson* and *Alabama* were completed their engineering overhaul and backfit in FY2006 and reentered the fleet in 2007 and 2008.

The last of the Trident I (C-4) missiles was removed from the fleet in October 2004, when the USS *Alabama* off-loaded its missiles and began the overhaul and backfit process. All the Trident submarines currently in the U.S. fleet now carry the Trident II missile.[93]

Basing Changes

When the Navy first decided, in the mid-1990s, to maintain a Trident fleet with 14 submarines, it planned to "balance" the fleet by deploying 7 Trident submarines at each of the 2 Trident bases. The Navy would have transferred three submarines from Kings Bay to Bangor, after four of the submarines from Bangor were removed from the ballistic missile fleet, for a balance of seven submarines at each base. However, these plans changed after the Bush Administration's Nuclear Posture Review. The Navy has transferred five submarines to Bangor, "balancing" the fleet by basing nine submarines at Bangor and five submarines at Kings Bay. Because two submarines would be in overhaul at any given time, this basing plan means that seven submarines would be operational at Bangor and five would be operational at Kings Bay.

According to unclassified reports, the Navy began moving Trident submarines from Kings Bay to Bangor in 2002, and transferred the fifth submarine in September 2005.[94] This change in basing pattern apparently reflected changes in the international security environment, with fewer targets within range of submarines operating in the Atlantic, and a greater number of targets within range of submarines operating in the Pacific. In particular, the shift allows the United States to improve its coverage of targets in China and North Korea.[95] Further, as the United States modifies its nuclear targeting objectives it could alter the patrol routes for the submarines operating in both oceans, so that a greater number of emerging targets would be within range of the submarines in a short amount of time.

Warhead Loadings

The Trident II (D-5) missiles can be equipped to carry up to eight warheads each. Under the terms of the original START Treaty, which was in force from 1994 to 2009, the United States could remove warheads from Trident missiles, and reduce the number listed in the database, a process known as downloading, to comply with the treaty's limit of 6,000 warheads. The United States

[92] SSBN-726 Ohio-Class FBM Submarines, GlobalSecurity.org, http://www.globalsecurity.org/wmd/systems/ssbn-726-recent.htm.

[93] Morris, Jefferson. Older Trident Missiles to be Phased out by Fall, Admiral Says. Aerospace Daily and Defense Report, June 17, 2005.

[94] Robert S. Norris and Hans M. Kristensen. U.S. Nuclear Forces, 2006. Bulletin of the Atomic Scientists. January/February 2006.

[95] Ibid.

took advantage of this provision, reducing to six warheads per missile on the eight Trident submarines based at Bangor, WA.[96]

During the George W. Bush Administration, the Navy further reduced the number of warheads on the Trident submarines so that the United States could reduce its forces to the 2,200 deployed warheads permitted under the 2002 Moscow Treaty. The United States did not have to reach this limit until 2012, but it had done so by 2009.

The United States has continued to reduce the total numbers of warheads carried on its Trident missiles to reach the New START Treaty limits. Unlike START, which attributed the same number of warheads to each missile of a given type, regardless of whether some of the missiles carried fewer warheads, the United States can deploy different numbers of warheads on different missiles, and count only the actual warheads deployed on the force. This allows each missile to be tailored to meet the mission assigned to that missile.[97] The United States does not need to indicate how many warheads are deployed on each missile at all times; it must simply report the total number of operationally deployed warheads on all of its strategic nuclear delivery vehicles. The United States and Russia can confirm that actual number of warheads on a specific missile, with random, short-notice inspections. Moreover, the United States will not have to alter the platforms in the missiles, so it could restore warheads to its Trident missiles if circumstances changed.

Modernization Plans and Programs

The Navy initially planned to keep Trident submarines in service for 30 years, but then extended that time period to 42 years. This extension reflects the judgment that ballistic missile submarines would have operated with less demanding missions than attack submarines, and could, therefore, be expected to have a much longer operating life than the expected 30-year life of attack submarines. Therefore, since 1998, the Navy has assumed that each Trident submarine would have an expected operating lifetime of at least 42 years, with two 20-year operating cycles separated by a 2-year refueling overhaul.[98] With this schedule, the submarines will begin to retire from the fleet in the late 2020s. The Navy has also pursued a number of programs to ensure that it has enough missiles to support this extended life for the submarines.

Trident Missile Production and Life Extension

The Navy purchased a total force of 533 D-5 missiles through 2012. It continued to produce rocket motors, at a rate of around one per month, and to procure alternation kits (known as SPALTs) needed to meet the extended service life of the submarine. Although the Navy plans to deploy its submarines with only 240 ballistic missiles under New START, it needs the greater number of missiles to support the fleet throughout the their life-cycle. In addition, around 50 of the Trident missiles are available for use by Great Britain in its Trident submarines. The remainder would support the missile's test program throughout the life of the Trident system.

The Navy is pursuing a life extension program for the D-5 missiles, known as the D5LE (D-5 Life Extension) so that they will remain capable and reliable throughout the 42-year life of the

[96] Even though four of these submarines are being converted to SSGNs, they still count under the START Treaty because they still have SLBM launch tubes. Each of those tubes count as six warheads. See U.S. Department of State. Bureau of Verification, Compliance, and Implementation. START Aggregate Number of Strategic Offensive Arms. April 1, 2006.

[97] Hans M. Kristensen and Robert S. Norris, "United States Nuclear Forces, 2017," *Bulletin of the Atomic Scientists*, December 2016, p. 52.

[98] SSBN Ohio-Class FBM Submarines. GlobalSecurity.org.

Trident submarines; they will also serve as the initial missile on the new Columbia class submarine, supporting that system through 2039. The funding for the Trident II missile supported the purchase of additional solid rocket motors other critical components required to support the missile throughout its service life. Reports indicate the Navy started loading the submarines with the new missile in 2017.[99]

In 2019, the Navy's Strategic Systems Program office indicated that it would begin a second life extension program for the Trident II missile—known as the D5LE2—to replace old parts and ensure the missiles' reliability through the life of the Columbia class submarine.[100] Reports indicate that the Navy planned to spend $700 million over six years to conduct studies and analyses, with the design of the new missile beginning in FY2025.[101]

According to the Navy's budget documents for FY2022, the D5LE missile would not be able to support the Columbia class submarine "beginning in 2039 through its predicted service life (2084) due to age, attrition, and obsolescence of critical components." The D5LE2 will, therefore, "address the Columbia service life requirement … to ensure a credible and survivable strategic deterrent through the service life of COLUMBIA Class SSBNs. Vice Admiral Johnny Wolfe, the director, Strategic Systems Programs (SSP), noted, during testimony before the House Armed Services Committee in June 2021, that the D5LE2 "will yield multiple benefits in missile performance." He further indicated that the changes could be "so extensive" that the missile will essentially be a new weapon. He argued that it was needed to "ensure that Trident remains credible in the face of a dynamic threat environment."[102]

The Navy allocated $5.5 billion to the Trident II missile program in FY2008 and FY2009. This funding supported the purchase of an additional 36 Trident II missiles. The Navy spent $1.05 billion on Trident II modifications in FY2010 and requested $1.1 billion in FY2011. In FY2010, $294 million was allocated to the purchase of 24 new missiles, $154.4 million was allocated to missile support costs, and $597.7 million was allocated to the Trident II Life Extension program. In FY2011, the Navy requested $294.9 million for the purchase of 24 new missiles, $156.9 million to missile support costs, and $655.4 million to the Trident II Life Extension Program. The FY2012 budget included $1.3 billion for Trident II missile program. Within this total, $191 million was allocated to the purchase of 24 additional new missiles, $137.8 million was allocated to missile support costs, and $980 million was allocated to the Trident II Life Extension Program. This was the last year during which the Navy sought to purchase new Trident II missiles. The FY2013 budget requested $1.2 billion for the Trident II missile program. This total included $524 million for program production and support costs, and $700.5 million for the Trident II life extension program. The Navy requested $1.14 billion for this program area in FY2014. According to the Navy's budget documents, this allowed it to continue to purchase components, such as the alteration kits for the guidance and missile electronics systems and solid rocket motors for these

[99] Hans M. Kristensen and Robert S. Norris, "U.S. Nuclear Forces, 2018," *Bulletin of the Atomic Scientists*, March 2018, https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/pdf/10.1080/00963402.2018.1438219?needAccess=true.

[100] Megan Eckstein, "Navy Beginning Tech Study to Extend Trident Nuclear Missile Into the 2080s," *USNI News*, November 14, 2019, https://news.usni.org/2019/11/14/navy-beginning-tech-study-to-extend-trident-nuclear-missile-into-the-2080s.

[101] Jason Sherman, "Navy reveals six-year, $700M plan to design second Trident SLBM life extension," *Inside Defense*, March 6, 2020, https://insidedefense.com/daily-news/navy-reveals-six-year-700m-plan-design-second-trident-slbm-life-extension.

[102] Richard R. Burgess, "Navy's SSP Admiral: New Missile Planned for Introduction on 9th Columbia SSBN," *Seapower Magazine*, June 10, 2021, https://seapowermagazine.org/navys-ssp-admiral-new-missile-planned-for-introduction-on-9th-columbia-ssbn/.

missiles. The Navy received $1.17 billion for FY2015 and $1.1 billion for FY2016 for Trident II modifications.

The Navy requested, and Congress authorized, $1.1 billion for Trident II modifications in FY2017, $1.2 billion in FY2018, and $1.1 billion in FY2019. In its FY2020 budget request, the Navy requested $1.17 billion for Trident II modifications, with the funding covered through the Overseas Contingency Operations (OCO) portion of the Pentagon budget. When asked about this anomaly, the Navy confirmed that it did not plan to employ Trident missiles in ongoing overseas operations, and that it was instructed to fund the program through OCO to meet the constraints of the Budget Control Act. Congress approved this funding in the FY2020 National Defense Authorization Act (P.L. 116-92). The Navy plans to spend about $5 billion on Trident II modifications between FY2021 and FY2024.

The Navy requested $1.17 billion for Trident II modifications in FY2021. Within this total, the Navy requested $111 million for the D5LE2 project. Although not noted in the budget document's description, $32 million will support the development of the MK7 aeroshell, which will be deployed on the D5LE2 missile with the new W93 warhead (described below). Congress approved these amounts in the FY2021 National Defense Authorization Act.

The Navy has requested $1.14 billion for Trident II modifications in FY2022.

W76 Warhead Life Extension

The overwhelming majority of Trident missiles are deployed with the MK4/W76 warhead, which, according to unclassified estimates, has a yield of 100 kilotons.[103] It is recently completed a life extension program (LEP) that was designed to enhance its capabilities. According to some reports, the Navy had initially planned to apply this program to around 25% of the W76 warheads, but then increased that plan to cover more than 60% of the stockpile. NNSA completed production of the W76-1 LEP in 2019. The LEP is intended to add 30 years to the warhead life "by refurbishing the nuclear explosive package, the arming, firing, and fusing system, the gas transfer system, and associated cables, elastomers, valves, pads, cushions, foam supports, telemetries, and other miscellaneous parts."

NNSA requested $224.1 million for the W76 LEP in FY2018 and $133.9 million in FY2019. It did not request any additional funding in FY2020 or FY2021 due to the "completion of remaining W76 warhead modifications and associated deliveries to the Navy. The FY2019 budget documents also introduced a new component to the W76 LEP. NNSA noted that "the 2018 Nuclear Posture Review (NPR) states that the United States will modify a small quantity of existing SLBM warheads to provide a low-yield option in the near-term." The NPR views this capability as a response to the belief that Russia, using what is often referred to as the "escalate to de-escalate" doctrine, might misjudge U.S. willingness to respond to the limited first use of nuclear weapons during a conventional conflict in Europe. The NPR argues that, by deploying a low-yield SLBM warhead, the United States will "ensure that the Russian leadership does not miscalculate regarding the consequences of limited nuclear first use" and will "understand that nuclear first-use, however limited, will fail to achieve its objectives, fundamentally alter the nature of a conflict, and trigger incalculable and intolerable costs for Moscow."[104]

[103] Robert S. Norris and Hans M. Kristensen. U.S. Nuclear Forces, 2015. Bulletin of the Atomic Scientists. March 2015, http://bos.sagepub.com/content/71/2/107.full.pdf+html.

[104] Department of Defense, *Nuclear Posture Review*, Washington, DC, February 2, 2018, p. 30, https://media.defense.gov/2018/Feb/02/2001872886/-1/-1/1/2018-NUCLEAR-POSTURE-REVIEW-FINAL-REPORT.PDF.

NNSA designated the low-yield version of the W76 warhead as the W76-2. NNSA's FY2019 budget request did not request any funding specifically allocated to this modification, but it did note that "as the Nuclear Weapons Council translates policy into military requirements, the Administration will work with Congress for appropriate authorizations and appropriations to develop options that support the modification." The White House later included a request for $65 million for this modification in a budget amendment package submitted to Congress on April 13, 2018. This document stated that the amendment would "authorize the production of low-yield ballistic missiles to replace higher-yield weapons currently deployed, maintaining the overall number of deployed U.S. ballistic missile warheads." It noted that a delay in the program past FY2019 "would require a restart of the W76 production line, increase costs, and delay delivery to the Department of Defense."[105]

Congress approved the FY2019 funding request in the Energy and Water Appropriations Act, H.R. 5895, and noted, in the conference report (H.Rept. 115-929), that NNSA must "comply with the direction in the House report regarding the W76-2." The House report (H.Rept. 115-697) mandated that NNSA provide Congress with "a report detailing the plan, rationale, costs, and implications of producing a low-yield variant of the W76 warhead." The report is to include not only cost and schedule estimates, but also a "detailed discussion of the military requirements associated with the W76-2."

NNSA completed its work on the W76-2 warhead in FY2019, so it requested only $10 million for the program in FY2020 to support program documentation and close out activities. The Navy also requested $19.6 million to begin the integration of the warhead onto its D-5 missiles. The House, in its version of the FY2020 National Defense Authorization Act [H.R. 2500] prohibited the use of FY2020 funds for that purpose. The Senate version of the bill included the funding, and Congress approved the requests for both $10 million for NNSA and $19.6 million for the Navy in the final version of the FY2020 National Defense Authorization Act (P.L. 116-92).

Press reports indicate that the Navy began to deploy the W76-2 warhead in late January 2020. John Rood, then the Undersecretary of Defense for Policy, confirmed the deployment in early February, noting that "the warhead will help the United States dissuade Russia from risking launching a limited nuclear conflict."[106]

Several questions came up during the W76 life extension program. For example, some weapons experts questioned whether the warhead's design is reliable enough to ensure that the warheads will explode at its intended yield.[107] In addition, in June 2006, an inspector general's report from the Department of Energy questioned the management practices at the National Nuclear Security Administration (NNSA), which is responsible for the LEP, arguing that management problems had led to delays and created cost overruns in the program. This raised questions about whether NNSA would be able to meet the September 2007 delivery date for the warhead,[108] and, when combined with other technical issues, delayed the delivery of the first W76 warhead until August 2008. The Navy accepted the first refurbished warhead into the stockpile in August 2009.[109]

[105] Aaron Mehta, "Trump administration repurposes $65 million for new nuclear warhead design," *Defense News*, April 17, 2018, https://www.defensenews.com/smr/nuclear-triad/2018/04/17/trump-administration-repurposes-65-million-for-new-nuclear-warhead-design/.

[106] Robert Burns, "US adds 'low yield' nuclear weapon to its submarine arsenal," *Associated Press*, February 4, 2020, https://apnews.com/b910d5f4f2076d558416ae021b511517.

[107] Fleck, John. Flaws Seen in Sub-Launched Nuclear Warhead. Albuquerque Journal. July 8, 2004.

[108] Costa, Keith J. IG: Project Weaknesses put W-76 Warhead Refurbishment Plan at Risk. *InsideDefense.com*, June 8, 2006.

[109] "Navy Receives First Refurbished W-76 Warheads," *Global Security Newswire*, November 6, 2009.

W88 Alteration Program

While most Trident II missiles carry W76 warheads, a portion of the fleet carries the W88 warhead. This warhead, the last to be added to the U.S. nuclear stockpile, entered the force in the late 1980s. According to DOE, this warhead is also in need of work to address concerns with its safety and reliability. In particular, according to recent testimony, the W88 warhead is in the "development engineering phase for Alteration (ALT) 370 to replace the aging arming, fuzing, and firing components." In August 2014, the Nuclear Weapons Council also decided to address potential problems with the warhead's conventional high explosive during the ALT 370 program. This program received $169.5 million in FY2014, $165.4 million in FY2015, and $220.1 million in FY2016. In its FY2016 budget request, NNSA indicated that the additional funding for this program will come from offsets generated by reducing sustainment activities and the quantities of stored warheads for some other types of warheads. In essence, NNSA "identified areas where increased risk could be accepted to produce cost-savings within the current program—without additional funding—and without additional delays to future work."[110] NNSA received $281.1 million for the W88 Alteration in FY2017. It requested $332.3 million for FY2018, $304.3 million in FY2019, and $304.2 million in FY2020. Congress enacted these amounts. NNSA has requested $256.9 million for the W88 Alternation in FY2021.

According to NNSA budget documents, this program was scheduled to produce its first production unit (FPU) in 2020. However, in May 2019, NNSA indicated that the delivery of the first production unit would slip after it identified defects in the electrical capacitors used in the modified warheads. NNSA's Kansas City National Security Campus, which acquires the nonnuclear parts of nuclear weapons, had determined that the capacitors might not remain reliable for 30-year life of the modified warheads. As a result, NNSA planned to replace the capacitors that cost about $5 per unit with $75 units built to a higher standard. This is likely to add about $120-$150 million to the cost of the W88-Alt LEP.[111]

In mid-July 2021, NNSA announced that it had "successfully completed the system-level First Production Unit for the W88 Alteration (Alt) 370" on July 1, 2021. Although delayed past the expected FY2020 date, NNSA noted that it had completed this FPU one month ahead of the date planned in the adjusted schedule.[112]

W93 Warhead and MK7 Aeroshell

In its FY2021 budget request, NNSA requested $53 million to begin Phase 1 "concept assessment and refinement" activities for a new W93 warhead. NNSA and the Navy have indicated that the W93 sea-based warhead will eventually replace the W76 and W88 warheads on life-extended Trident II missiles. In the past, NNSA documents had referred to this warhead as the "next Navy warhead." NNSA had not expected to request funding for it until FY2023. A DOD official noted that because the warhead does not yet exist, this is not a life extension program, but neither

[110] Ibid.

[111] Dan Leone, "Balky Capacitors Could Delay Two NNSA Nuke Refurb Programs," *Nuclear Security and Deterrence Monitor*, May 10, 2019, https://www.exchangemonitor.com/balky-capacitors-delay-two-nnsa-nuke-refurb-programs/. See, also, Aaron Mehta, "How a $5 part used to modernize nuclear warheads could cost $850 million to fix," *Defense News*, September 25, 2019, https://www.defensenews.com/smr/nuclear-arsenal/2019/09/25/nuclear-warhead-programs-need-850m-fix-heres-how-the-government-plans-to-cover-it/?utm_source=Sailthru&utm_medium=email&utm_campaign=EBB%2009.26.19&utm_term=Editorial%20-%20Early%20Bird%20Brief.

[112] National Nuclear Security Administration, *NNSA completes First Production Unit of W88 Alteration 370*, Washington, DC, July 13, 2021, https://www.energy.gov/nnsa/articles/nnsa-completes-first-production-unit-w88-alteration-370.

NNSA nor DOD has designated this as a "new" warhead. The Pentagon has indicated, however, that it will be a "new program of record," and will be based on previously nuclear-tested designs. Therefore, it will not require nuclear testing.[113]

NNSA indicated that the program for this new warhead would follow the Phase 1 through 7 nuclear weapons acquisition cycle system[114] during its development process. Congress, in the FY2021 NDAA Conference Report (H.Rept. 116-617), outlined a number of reporting and assessment requirements designed to strengthen oversight and ensure adequate program management. These include reports on the planned characteristics of the warhead; assessments of the requirements that the warhead might generate for the nuclear weapons enterprise; a plan to implement a process of independent peer review of the warhead's characteristics; and a report on the requirements for the numbers and types of warheads that will be deployed on the U.S. SSBN force.

NNSA requested $53 million to begin studies on the W93 warhead in FY2021; Congress authorized this amount. The Navy also plans to design a new reentry body, known as the MK7 aeroshell, that would house the new warhead when it is deployed on Trident II missiles. It requested $32 million for this effort in FY2021, and expects to request a total of $480 million over the next five years.[115] NNSA has requested $72 million for the W93 warhead in FY2022, with the program transitioning from the Phase 1 concepts study to Phase 2, where NNSA and will review the concepts and provide a specific set of design options. It has also requested $62 million to continue work on the MK7 aeroshell.

The Columbia Class Submarine

The Navy is currently completing design work and beginning procurement of a new class of ballistic missile submarines, known as the Columbia Class. This was originally known as the SSBN(X) program and the Ohio Replacement Program (ORP). These submarines will replace the Ohio-class Trident submarines as they reach the end of their service lives.[116] The Trident submarines will begin to retire in 2027, and the Navy initially indicated that it would need the new submarines to begin to enter the fleet by 2029, before the number of Trident submarines falls below 12.[117] To do this, the Navy would have had to begin construction of its new submarine by 2019 so that it could begin to enter the fleet in 2029.[118] However, in the FY2013 budget request, the Navy delayed the procurement of the new class of submarines by two years. As a result, the first new submarine will enter the fleet in 2031 and the number of SSBNs in the fleet is expected to decline to 10 for most of the 2030s.

[113] Aaron Mehta, "Inside America's newly revealed nuclear ballistic missile warhead of the future," Defense News, February 24, 2020, https://www.defensenews.com/smr/nuclear-arsenal/2020/02/24/inside-americas-newly-revealed-nuclear-ballistic-missile-warhead-of-the-future/?utm_source=Sailthru&utm_medium=email&utm_campaign=EBB%2002.25.20&utm_term=Editorial%20-%20Early%20Bird%20Brief.

[114] U.S. Department of Energy, *Nuclear Weapons Life Cycle*, Fact Sheet, Washington, DC, September 2015, https://www.energy.gov/sites/prod/files/2018/06/f53/6x%20process.pdf.

[115] Jon Harper, "Political Battle Brewing Over New Nuclear Program," *National Defense*, March 17, 2020, https://www.nationaldefensemagazine.org/articles/2020/3/17/political-battle-brewing-over-new-nuclear-program.

[116] For details on this program, see CRS Report R41129, *Navy Columbia (SSBN-826) Class Ballistic Missile Submarine Program: Background and Issues for Congress*, by Ronald O'Rourke.

[117] Christopher J. Castelli, "Navy Confronts $80 Billion Cost of New Ballistic Missile Submarines," *Inside Defense*, November 3, 2009.

[118] RADM Stephen Johnson, Director, Navy Strategic Programs Office. Speech at the NDU/NDIA Seminar Series, June 23, 2009.

Costs and Funding

The SSBN(X) program received $497.4 million in research and development funding in the Navy's FY2010 budget. The Navy requested an additional $672.3 million in research and development funding for the program in its FY2011 budget proposal. The FY2012 budget included $1.07 billion to develop the SSBN(X). It expected to request $927.8 million in FY2013, with the funding of $29.4 billion between 2011 and 2020. However, with the delay of two years in the procurement of the first SSBN(X), the Navy budgeted only $565 million for the program in FY2013. It then budgeted $1.1 billion for FY2014 and $1.2 billion in FY2015. It received an additional $1.39 billion in FY2016, with $971.4 million allocated to submarine development and $419.3 million allocated to power systems.

The Navy requested an additional $1.9 billion for the Ohio-replacement (ORP) in FY2017. Within this total, $700.1 million was allocated to submarine development and $390.3 million was allocated to nuclear power systems. The Navy also requested $773.1 million for advanced procurement; this funding will support detailed design work in preparation for the beginning of construction. Both the House and the Senate authorized the requested levels of funding in their versions of the 2017 Defense Authorization Bill. The House, however, moved the $773.1 million for advanced procurement from the Navy's shipbuilding budget into the congressionally created National Sea-based Deterrent Fund (NSDF), which is described below. Congress approved the full funding requests in the FY2017 National Defense Authorization Act (P.L. 114-328), but did not transfer funding for advanced procurement to the NSDF. The Navy requested $1.9 billion for the Columbia class submarine in FY2018, with $776.2 million for submarine development, $265.5 million for advanced nuclear power systems, and $842.9 million for advanced procurement. Congress approved this request in the National Defense Authorization Act for FY2018 (H.Rept. 115-404).

The Navy requested $3.8 billion for the Columbia Class submarine in its FY2019 budget. Within this total, $514.8 million was allocated to submarine development, $256.1 million to advanced nuclear power systems, and $3 billion to advanced procurement. Congress authorized $526.8 million for submarine development and $3.2 billion for advanced procurement in the National Defense Authorization Act for Fiscal Year 2019 (P.L. 115-232). According to the Navy's budget documents, the FY2019 request is "predominantly driven by procurement of the two-year long lead time" of equipment needed to begin construction of the first submarine. This equipment includes launcher and fire control subsystem components, nuclear propulsion plant equipment, and hull mechanical and electrical systems. According to the Navy, "these funds are required in October of 2018 to ensure the Columbia Program meets program schedules and the components will meet contractor in yard need dates to support on time construction start and delivery of the lead ship." Moreover, within the $3 billion requested for advanced procurement, the largest single amount ($1.7 billion) is allocated to the "nuclear propulsion plant equipment"—the nuclear reactor that will power the submarine.

The Navy requested $2.23 billion for the Columbia Class submarine in its FY2020 budget. Within this total, $551 million is allocated to research and development, $1.7 billion is allocated to advanced procurement. In addition, the NNSA budget contains $75 million for the development of the nuclear reactor for the submarine. The House, in its version of the FY2020 National Defense Authorization Bill, increased funding for advanced procurement to $1.824 billion, and the Senate increased funding for research and development to $548.1 million. Congress approved $1.822 billion for advanced procurement and $548.1 million for research and development in the FY2020 National Defense Authorization Act (P.L. 116-92).

The Navy requested $4.4 billion for the Columbia Class submarine in its FY2021 budget. While this is a 90% increase over the request for FY2020, it is consistent with the funding level that planned for FY2021, with significant funding now going toward procurement. Within the $4.4 billion total, the Navy allocated $397 million to research and development, $1.1 billion to advanced procurement, and $2.9 billion to procurement. In addition, the NNSA budget contained $64.7 million for the development of the nuclear reactor for the submarine. Congress, in the conference report on the FY2021 National Defense Authorization Act (H.Rept. 116-617), generally approved the Navy's request but added $130 million to the funding for advanced procurement. The conference report notes that this added funding was intended to support the expansion of the submarine industrial base to ensure that second- and third-tier contractors can meet increased production requirements as the procurement phase of the program proceeds.

The Navy has requested $4.65 billion for the Columbia class submarine in its FY2021 budget. Within this total it has allocated $1.65 billion to advanced procurement and $3 billion to procurement. In addition, the NNSA budget requests $55 million for the development of the reactor for the submarine.

The Navy had planned to begin the detailed design for the submarine and to begin advanced procurement of critical components in FY2015, with the seven-year construction period for the first submarine beginning in FY2019. This timeline changed, in part to reduce near-term costs, but also to reduce risks in the program. With advanced procurement beginning in FY2017, the Navy plans to begin building the first hull in 2021. At the same time, it will continue to support the joint U.S./U.K. development of a common missile compartment, which both nations will use in their new SSBNs.

The Navy initially estimated that each submarine in this program could cost $6 billion to $7 billion in FY2010 dollars. It has worked to redesign the submarine and reduce the costs, with the plan to hold each submarine to around $4.9 billion, in FY2010 dollars. Officials in the Navy and analysts outside government have expressed concerns about the cost of this program, and about the effect that these costs may have on the rest of the Navy's shipbuilding plans. A study by the Congressional Budget Office indicated that the SSBN(X) program could cost a total of $97-$102 billion, in 2010 dollars, with $10-$15 billion for research and development and $87 billion for the procurement of 12 submarines.[119] A March 2015 GAO report assessing estimated the total acquisition cost of the SSBN(X) program at about $95.8 billion, in constant FY2015 dollars, including about $11.8 billion in research and development costs and about $84.0 billion in procurement costs.[120] More recently, the Navy has estimated that the first submarine would cost $13.2 billion in 2018 dollars and that subsequent ships would have an average cost of $6.6 billion, for a total acquisition cost of $85 billion for 12 submarines. With research and development costs of $13 billion, the total acquisition cost would be $98 billion.[121]

There has been widespread agreement, in the Navy, at the Pentagon, and among defense analysts, that the costs associated with the Columbia class submarine could undermine the rest of the Navy's shipbuilding budget. At one point, Navy officials estimated that, if the Navy funded this program through its current, planned shipbuilding budget, it would have to forgo the acquisition

[119] Congressional Budget Office, *An Analysis of the Navy's Fiscal Year 2014 Shipbuilding Plan*, Washington, DC, October 2013, p. 24, http://www.cbo.gov/publication/44655.

[120] Government Accountability Office, Defense Acquisitions[:] Assessments of Selected Weapons Programs, GAO-15-342SP, March 2015, p. 148.

[121] CBO has calculated the acquisition cost, excluding research and development, at $93 billion. See Congressional Budget Office, An Analysis of the Navy's Fiscal Year 2019 Shipbuilding Plan, Washington, DC, October 2018, p. 18, https://www.cbo.gov/system/files?file=2018-10/54564-FY19Shipbuilding.pdf.

of up to 32 other naval vessels. According to former Navy Secretary Ray Mabus, unless Congress provides extra funding, "the production of 12 new ships to replace the Ohio-class submarines could 'gut' the Navy's shipbuilding budget for more than a decade."[122] In testimony before Congress in February 2015, Navy officials noted that "the Navy continues to need significant increases in our topline beyond the FYDP [Future Years Defense Plan] … in order to afford the OR [Ohio replacement] SSBN procurement costs. Absent a significant increase … OR SSBN construction will seriously impair construction of virtually all other ships in the battle force: attack submarines, destroyers, and amphibious warfare ships."[123]

In response to this growing fiscal pressure, Admiral Richard Breckenridge suggested, in testimony offered in 2013, that Congress set up an annual $4 billion supplemental fund outside the Navy's budget to help support this program.[124] Several Members of Congress have supported this proposal.[125] Congress included language in the FY2015 National Defense Authorization Act establishing a National Sea-based Deterrence Fund (P.L. 113-291, §1022). According to the legislation, money placed in the fund will be available for the design, construction, purchase, alteration, and conversion of "national sea-based deterrence vessels," which is a reference to ballistic missile submarines. The legislation also states that the Secretary of Defense has the authority to transfer up to $3.5 billion into the fund from unobligated funds in the DOD budget. Congress did not, however, appropriate increased funding for this effort, and the Secretary of Defense had not identified or transferred any money into this fund. In the FY2016 NDAA, (H.R. 1735, §1051), Congress expanded the authority to transfer funding and included provisions allowing the Secretary of the Navy to enter into "economic order quantity contracts" that might achieve economic efficiencies based on production economies for major components or subsystems. Some analysts estimate that this provision could reduce the procurement costs for the submarine, saving, perhaps, several hundred million dollars per submarine.[126]

Most experts agree that, without increased appropriations, this fund may protect the Navy's shipbuilding budget from the costs of the Columbia class submarine, but that it would not really solve the DOD's problem, because the money for the fund would have to come from other portions of the Pentagon budget.[127] Nevertheless, the Navy continues to support the Columbia

[122] Yasmin Tadjdeh, "Mabus: Ohio-Class Submarine Replacement Could 'Gut' Navy Shipbuilding Budget," *National Defense*, September 15, 2014, http://www.nationaldefensemagazine.org/blog/Lists/Posts/Post.aspx?List=7c996cd7%2Dcbb4%2D4018%2Dbaf8%2D8825eada7aa2&ID=1601.

[123] Statement of the Honorable Sean J. Stackley, Assistant Secretary of the Navy (Research, Development and Acquisition) and Vice Admiral Joseph P. Mulloy, Deputy Chief of Naval Operations for Integration of Capabilities and Resources and Lieutenant General Kenneth J. Glueck Jr., Deputy Commandant, Combat Development and Integration & Commanding General, Marine Corps Combat Development Command, Before the Subcommittee on Seapower and Projection Forces of the House Armed Services Committee on Department of the Navy Seapower and Projection Forces Capabilities, February 25, 2015, p. 8.

[124] Lee Hudson, "Navy Asks Congress To Set Up Supplemental Fund for SSBN(X)," *InsideDefense.com*, September 12, 2013.

[125] "Some U.S. Lawmakers Eye Funding new Submarines Outside Normal Process," *Global Security Newswire*, March 12, 2014. See, also, Lee Hudson, "House Committee Looks to Create Separate Fund for Ohio Replacement," *InsideDefense.com*, May 2, 2014.

[126] Eric Laws, *An Analysis of the Navy's Fiscal Year 2016 Shipbuilding Plan*, Congressional Budget Office, Washington, DC, October 2015, pp. 18-19, https://www.cbo.gov/sites/default/files/114th-congress-2015-2016/reports/50926-Shipbuilding_OneCol-2.pdf.

[127] Kingston Reif, "Hill Denies Money for Submarine Fund," *Arms Control Today*, January 2016. http://www.armscontrol.org/ACT/2016_0102/News/Hill-Denies-Money-for-Submarine-Fund.

class submarine as its highest priority, with Admiral John Richardson, the Chief of Naval Operations, noting that the ballistic missile submarine force is "foundational to our survival."[128]

Force Posture

The Navy designed the Columbia Class submarines with only 16 ballistic missile launch tubes. The existing Trident submarines have 24 launch tubes, and each has been reduced to 20 missiles as the United States complies with the New START Treaty. Congress questioned the Navy on this plan during hearings in April 2011, with some Members asking whether the United States would be able to deploy enough warheads if it reduced the numbers of missiles on each submarine. Admiral Terry Benedict, then the Director of the Navy's Strategic Systems Program Office, testified that the Navy's ability to "upload" warheads onto Trident missiles convinced him, along with other Navy and STRATCOM officials, that they could be comfortable with this configuration.[129]

A report published in late 2011 indicated that the Office of Management and Budget (OMB) suggested that the Navy reduce the number of SSBNs in the fleet to 10, but increase the number of launch tubes on each submarine to 20.[130] According to the OMB analysis, this could save the Navy $7 billion over the life of the fleet, by reducing acquisition costs and operating costs. It would not, however, undermine the submarines' mission because, with 20 missiles per submarine, the Navy would still be able to cover the full range of targets assigned to the Trident fleet. Analysts outside government have offered similar suggestions, noting that the Navy could save $27 billion over 10 years and $120 billion over the life of the fleet if the Navy built 8, rather than 12 submarines.[131] Moreover, according to this analysis, the Navy would be able to deploy the necessary number of warheads on these submarines, even if it did not increase the number of launch tubes, by deploying more warheads on each of the Trident missiles on the submarine.

Generally, the number of launch tubes on the submarines should not affect the number of warheads carried by each submarine or the ability of the fleet to hold a range of potential targets at risk. Trident missiles can be equipped with eight warheads each, but, in their current configuration, the missiles likely carry, on average, only three or four warheads each, as the force was reduced to the levels in New START. If the new submarines carry only 16 missiles, rather than the 20 planned under New START, then they could deploy with 5-6 warheads per missile. In essence, the Navy would put the same number of warheads on each submarine, but would just spread them over a smaller number of missiles.

The Navy has noted that, as the United States reduces its forces to New START levels, the lower number of missiles per submarine will allow the United States to retain a larger number of submarines, without exceeding the treaty's limit of 700 operational delivery vehicles. This allows the Navy to maintain a fleet of 12 submarines, and to operate those submarines with continuous deployments from 2 bases. The Navy has argued that, if it reduces the numbers of submarines in the fleet, and alters its deployment patterns, it will not be able to meet its requirements, as these cover more than just the total number of warheads on the fleet or total number of warheads at sea at any time. Critics outside the government, however, question this approach, both because a fleet of 12 submarines will cost more to procure and operate than a fleet of only 8 submarines and

[128] Robert Burns, "New Navy Leader: Nukes 'Foundational to Our Survival,'" *Associated Press*, January 7, 2016.

[129] Emelie Rutherford, "Navy Defends Plan for Just 16 Missile Tubes on Next Boomer," *Defense Daily*, April 7, 2011.

[130] Colin Clark, "OMB Pushes More Tubes, Fewer Boats for Ohio Replacement Subs," *AOL Defense*, November 4, 2011, http://defense.aol.com/2011/11/04/omb-pushes-more-tubes-fewer-boats-for-ohio-replacement-subs/.

[131] Tom Collina and Kelsey Davenport, "U.S. Must Rethink New Subs, Bombers," *Defense News*, October 24, 2011.

because this fleet presumes that the United States must retain its current pattern of operations for the SSBN fleet for the next 50-60 years.

With 12 submarines in the fleet, the Navy can maintain 4-5 on station at any time, patrolling in areas where they would need to be to launch their missiles promptly after a presidential order. But critics question whether this pattern, and the "continuous at-sea" deterrent of 4-5 submarines, will be necessary in the decades ahead. They note that the United States will be able to maintain a secure second strike deterrent on the submarines, even if they cannot launch as many warheads promptly as they can launch today. Others however, continue to support the current operational patterns, and to argue for a fleet of 12 submarines into the future. Congress, in the FY2013 Defense Authorization Bill (P.L. 112-239, §130) stated that "the continuous at-sea deterrence provided by a robust and modern fleet of nuclear-powered ballistic missile submarines is critical to maintaining nuclear deterrence and assurance and therefore is a central pillar of the national security of the United States." The legislation went on to indicate that "a minimum of 12 replacement ballistic missile submarines are necessary to provide continuous at-sea deterrence over the lifetime of such submarines."

Bombers

B-1 Bomber

The Air Force began to deploy the B-1 bomber in the mid-1980s and eventually deployed a fleet of 96 aircraft. After several crashes, the Air Force was left with 92 bombers in 2001. It sought to retire 30 of the aircraft, leaving a force of 62 bombers, but that plan met resistance from Congress. The B-1 served exclusively as a nuclear delivery vehicle through 1991, carrying short-range attack missiles and gravity bombs. Because these bombers were not equipped to carry nuclear-armed air-launched cruise missiles, each counted as a single delivery vehicle and a single warhead under START. In 1993, the Air Force began to convert the B-1 bombers to carry conventional weapons. Specifically, the Air Force welded a metal sleeve onto each of the pylon attachments under the bomber's wings, which prevented them from carrying air-launched cruise missiles.[132] This process was completed in 1997 and the B-1 bomber is no longer equipped to carry nuclear weapons. In 2011, the United States displayed the bomber to the Russians, under the terms of the New START Treaty, to demonstrate that it was no longer equipped to deliver nuclear weapons and to confirm that it would not count under the limits in New START. The bomber has contributed to U.S. conventional operations in Afghanistan and Iraq and contributed to reassurance missions in Asia.

In December 2020 the Air Force conducted a flight test during which a B-1 bomber demonstrated the ability to carry and release a JASSM cruise missile from an external pylon. They pylon used in this demonstration was not one of the under-wing pylons that had been covered as part of the bomber conversion. Air Force officials noted, however, that the goal was to eventually expand the use of the external pylons on the B-1 bombers to "increase the operational flexibility of the bomber fleet."[133] A representative for Air Force asserted that the use of the under-wing pylons to carry cruise missiles or hypersonic weapons would not violate the New START Treaty because

[132] Valerie Insinna, "The B-1B just launched a cruise missile externally. Hypersonic missiles could be next.," *Defense News*, December 9, 2020, https://www.defensenews.com/air/2020/12/09/the-b-1b-just-launched-a-cruise-missile-externally-hypersonic-missiles-could-be-next/?utm_source=Sailthru&utm_medium=email&utm_campaign=EBB%2012.10.20&utm_term=Editorial%20-%20Early%20Bird%20Brief.

[133] Giancarlo Casem, *B-1B Lancer completes successful external release demonstration*, Air Force Global Strike Command, Edwards Air Force Base, CA, December 9, 2020, https://www.afgsc.af.mil/News/Article-Display/Article/2441552/b-1b-lancer-completes-successful-external-release-demonstration/.

the missiles would carry conventional warheads. However, when the pylons were covered, the goal was to remove the bombers from accountability under the treaty. This accountability was based on an assessment of whether the bomber *could* carry nuclear-armed cruise missiles, not whether it was actually equipped with those missiles.

B-2 Bomber

The Air Force has 20 B-2 bombers, which are based at Whiteman AFB in Missouri.[134] The B-2 bomber can carry both B61 and B83 nuclear bombs, but is not equipped to carry cruise missiles. It can also carry conventional weapons and has participated in U.S. military campaigns from Bosnia to Iraq. It is designed as a "low observable" aircraft and was intended to improve the U.S. ability to penetrate Soviet air defenses. It continues to serve as a penetrating bomber, both when flying conventional missions and when supporting the nuclear deterrent mission. The Air Force has indicated that it needs significant maintenance and modernization funding to support the mission.[135]

Weapons

According to unclassified estimates, the United States has around 322 B61 and B83 bombs for use by strategic bombers, and an additional 230 B61 bombs for use by fighter aircraft.[136] The B61 contains a number of different versions. The B61-7 serves as a strategic bomb and is carried by B-2 bombers. The B61-3, 4, and 10 are considered nonstrategic bombs, with lower yields, and would be delivered by fighter aircraft like the F-16 and F-35. The B61-11, a modification developed in the 1990s, has a hardened, modified case so that it can penetrate some hardened targets, although probably not those encased in steel and concrete. The B61-Mod 7, along with the Mod-3 and Mod-4, and Mod-10 versions, are a part of an ongoing life extension program (LEP) that will produce a new B61-mod 12 bomb.[137] During the Obama Administration, NNSA announced that it planned to retire the B83, the largest bomb remaining in the U.S. arsenal, around 2025, after the completion of the B61 LEP. The Trump Administration, in the 2018 Nuclear Posture Review, altered that plan, announcing in the 2018 Nuclear Posture Review that it will sustain "the B83-1 past its currently planned retirement date until a suitable replacement is identified."[138] The Biden Administration has not yet altered this plan, with NNSA requesting $98.5 million for B83 sustainment in FY2022.

The Obama Administration strongly supported the life extension program for the B-61 bomb in the 2010 Nuclear Posture Review. The report indicated that "the Administration will fully fund the full scope LEP study and follow-on activities for the B61 bomb … to ensure first production begins in FY2017." The NPR noted that the life extension program for the B61 bomb, which would include enhancing safety, security, and use control, would also support U.S. extended

[134] A B-2 bomber crashed on take-off from Anderson Air Force Base on Guam in late February 2008, reducing the number of deployed bombers from 21 to 20.

[135] For details on the ongoing programs supporting this bomber and the B-52 bomber, see CRS Report R43049, *U.S. Air Force Bomber Sustainment and Modernization: Background and Issues for Congress*, by Jeremiah Gertler.

[136] Hans M. Kristensen and Matt Korda, "U.S. Nuclear Forces, 2019," *Bulletin of the Atomic Scientists*, April 2019, https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/pdf/10.1080/00963402.2019.1606503?needAccess=true.

[137] For a description of ongoing work in the B61 LEP program, see Kevin Robinson-Avila, "Overhauling the nation's nuclear arsenal: Sandia National Labs achieves B61 milestone," *Albuquerque Journal*, May 18, 2014.

[138] Department of Defense, *Nuclear Posture Review*, Washington, DC, February 2, 2018, p. 61, https://media.defense.gov/2018/Feb/02/2001872886/-1/-1/1/2018-NUCLEAR-POSTURE-REVIEW-FINAL-REPORT.PDF.

deterrence goals by allowing the United States to retain the capability to forward-deploy U.S. nuclear weapons on B-2 bombers and tactical fighter-bombers.[139] The Trump Administration also voiced strong support for the program in the FY2018 Nuclear Posture Review. The timeline for the program has slipped, and NNSA now expects the first unit to be available in 2022, rather than 2020. The delayed occurred after NNSA identified defects in the capacitors used in six major electrical components. NNSA's Kansas City National Security Campus, which acquires the nonnuclear parts of nuclear weapons, determined that the capacitors might not remain reliable for the 30-year life of the modified warheads. As a result, NNSA plans to replace the capacitors that cost about $5 per unit with $75 units built to a higher standard. This is likely to add about $600 million to $700 million to the cost of the B61-12 LEP.[140]

Some in Congress challenged the plans for this program, asking whether a less costly and complicated program might be sufficient. The Obama Administration claimed, however, that if it pursued a less complex life extension program now, it would need to initiate a second program a few years later to complete the remainder of the work. Moreover, the Obama Administration had noted that, after it completed the B61 life extension, DOE would be able to retire the much larger B83 bomb and reduce the number of B61 bombs in the U.S. stockpile. The Trump Administration continues to support the B61 life extension program, but has raised concerns about whether it will be able to replace the B83 in the U.S. stockpile. It noted that "the B83-1 and B61-11 can hold at risk a variety of protected targets," and, therefore, "both will be retained in the stockpile, at least until there is sufficient confidence in the B61-12 gravity bomb that will become available in 2020."[141] There also is no indication, in the 2018 NPR, that the B61 LEP will allow NNSA to reduce the number of nondeployed warheads in the U.S. stockpile.

The Air Force is also designing a new tail kit for the B61 bomb. This tail kit would replace the parachute that the bomb currently uses to slow to its targets, and would improve the accuracy of the weapon. Some analysts claimed that this tail kit would provide the bomb with new capabilities, and would undermine the Obama Administration's pledge that it would not develop new military capabilities as it conducted the warhead life extension programs.[142] Others, however, disputed this conclusion. They noted that the new B61-12 will combine an increase in accuracy with a reduction in yield, allowing it to accomplish the same mission as the current unguided, but higher yield, weapon. As a result, the Air Force has argued that the tail kit will allow the modified B61 bombs to meet operational requirements for the bomber fleet and provide "nuclear assurance to U.S. allies in Europe."

---

[139] Department of Defense, *Nuclear Posture Review*, Washington, DC, April 6, 2010, p. 27, https://dod.defense.gov/Portals/1/features/defenseReviews/NPR/2010_Nuclear_Posture_Review_Report.pdf.

[140] Dan Leone, "Balky Capacitors Could Delay Two NNSA Nuke Refurb Programs," *Nuclear Security and Deterrence Monitor*, May 10, 2019, https://www.exchangemonitor.com/balky-capacitors-delay-two-nnsa-nuke-refurb-programs/. See, also, Aaron Mehta, "How a $5 part used to modernize nuclear warheads could cost $850 million to fix," *Defense News*, September 25, 2019, https://www.defensenews.com/smr/nuclear-arsenal/2019/09/25/nuclear-warhead-programs-need-850m-fix-heres-how-the-government-plans-to-cover-it/?utm_source=Sailthru&utm_medium=email&utm_campaign=EBB%2009.26.19&utm_term=Editorial%20-%20Early%20Bird%20Brief.

[141] Department of Defense, *Nuclear Posture Review*, Washington, DC, February 2, 2018, p. 42, https://media.defense.gov/2018/Feb/02/2001872886/-1/-1/1/2018-NUCLEAR-POSTURE-REVIEW-FINAL-REPORT.PDF.

[142] William J. Broad and David Sanger, "As U.S. Modernizes Nuclear Weapons, "Smaller" Leaves Some Unease," *New York Times*, January 11, 2016. See, also, Kyle Mizokami, "Why the Pentagon's New Nukes Are Under Fire," *Popular Mechanics*, January 12, 2016.

The Air Force and the National Nuclear Security Administration (NNSA) conducted the first development flight test of the B61-12 LEP in July 2015[143] and the first qualification flight test in 2017. It conducted two additional qualification flight tests in 2018.[144] The tests integrated the new tail kit with bomb hardware developed by Sandia and Los Alamos National Laboratories. According to NNSA, these qualification flight tests evaluate "both the weapon's nonnuclear bomb functions as well as the aircraft's capability to deliver the weapons." They demonstrate "effective end-to-end system performance in a realistic ballistic flight environment."[145] These tests are likely to continue through 2020.

Congress appropriated $788.6 million for the B61 LEP in FY2018, $794 million in FY2019, $792.6 million in FY2020, and $815.7 million for FY2021. NNSA has requested $771.7 million for the B61 LEP in FY2022. The Air Force is supporting the funding for the tailkit program. Congress appropriated $148.2 million in FY2015, $212.1 million in FY2016, $137.9 million for FY2017. The Air Force requested an additional $91.2 million in FY2018, which was a significant reduction from the $151 million the Air Force expected to request for FY2018 when it submitted its FY2017 budget. The FY2018 budget documents note that reduction was not the result of any expected changes in the program and that funds may be used to address higher Air Force priorities. The Air Force also requested $88 million in advanced procurement funding to support the acquisition of 30 tailkit assemblies.

The Air Force requested $92 million for the research and development on the B61 tailkit in FY2019, along with $162 million in procurement funds to support the acquisition of 250 tailkit assemblies. The Air Force requested $27.6 million for research and development on the B61 tail kit in FY2020, along with $80.8 million in procurement funds to support the acquisition of 533 tail kit assemblies. The Air Force requested $35.6 million for the tail kit assembly program in FY2021; Congress authorized this amount in the FY2021 NDAA Conference Report (H.Rept. 116-617). The Air Force has requested only $2.7 million for the tail kit assembly program in FY2022.

This funding was designed to support the expected integration of the B61-12 into the force in the early 2020s. However, in May 2019, NNSA indicated that the delivery of the first production unit of the B61-12 was likely to slip after it identified defects in the electrical capacitors used in the modified warheads. NNSA's Kansas City National Security Campus, which acquires the nonnuclear parts of nuclear weapons, had determined that the capacitors might not remain reliable for 30-year life of the modified warheads. As a result, NNSA plans to replace the capacitors that cost about $5 per unit with $75 units built to a higher standard. This is likely to add about $600-700 million to the cost of the W88-Alt LEP.[146] NNSA does not plan to request additional funding

[143] Marina Malenic, "U.S. Completes first B-61 LEP Flight Test," *Janes Defense Weekly*, July 8, 2015.

[144] National Nuclear Security Administration. *NNSA, Air Force complete successful end-to-end B61-12 Life Extension Program flight tests at Tonopah Test Range*, June 29, 2018. https://www.energy.gov/nnsa/articles/nnsa-air-force-complete-successful-end-end-b61-12-life-extension-program-flight-tests.

[145] National Nuclear Security Administration, "NNSA, Air Force complete first B61-12 Life Extension Program qualification flight test at Tonopah Test Range," press release, April 13, 2017, https://nnsa.energy.gov/mediaroom/pressreleases/nnsa-air-force-complete-first-b61-12-life-extension-program-qualification.

[146] Dan Leone, "Balky Capacitors Could Delay Two NNSA Nuke Refurb Programs," *Nuclear Security and Deterrence Monitor*, May 10, 2019, https://www.exchangemonitor.com/balky-capacitors-delay-two-nnsa-nuke-refurb-programs/. See, also, Aaron Mehta, "How a $5 part used to modernize nuclear warheads could cost $850 million to fix," *Defense News*, September 25, 2019, https://www.defensenews.com/smr/nuclear-arsenal/2019/09/25/nuclear-warhead-programs-need-850m-fix-heres-how-the-government-plans-to-cover-it/?utm_source=Sailthru&utm_medium=email&utm_campaign=EBB%2009.26.19&utm_term=Editorial%20-%20Early%20Bird%20Brief.

to make up this difference, but will, instead, shift funding from other warhead life extension and sustainment programs.

B-52 Bomber

The Air Force maintains 76 B-52H aircraft at two bases, Barksdale, LA, and Minot, ND. Forty-six of these bombers are capable of delivering nuclear weapons, and 40 are deployed on a day-to-day basis.[147] The B-52 bomber, which first entered service in 1961, can be equipped to carry nuclear or conventional air-launched cruise missiles. The B-52 bombers can also deliver a wide range of conventional arms, and are currently receiving numerous upgrades to their communications and electronics systems.

The Air Force has proposed cutting the B-52 fleet on many occasions in the past 25 years. The 2006 Quadrennial Defense Review called for a reduction in the B-52 fleet from 94 to 56 aircraft. The budget request for FY2007 indicated that the Air Force planned to retire 18 bombers in FY2007 and 20 in FY2008. At the same time, the QDR called for continuing improvements to the B-1, B-2, and B-52 bombers' conventional capabilities using the funds that were saved by the retirement of the 38 aircraft. At hearings before the Senate Armed Services Committee, General James E. Cartwright, then the Commander of STRATCOM, noted that "the next generation weapons that we're fielding, these air-launched cruise missiles, the joint direct attack munitions, et cetera, are much more efficient than they were in the past."[148] General Cartwright also indicated that, in spite of the reduced size of the fleet, the Air Force would continue to deploy B-52 bombers at two bases.

During the FY2007 budget cycle, Congress rejected the Pentagon's proposals for at least part of the B-52 fleet. The House prohibited the Air Force from retiring any of the B-52 aircraft, and mandated that it maintain at least 44 "combat coded" aircraft until the Air Force began to replace the B-52 with a new bomber of equal or greater capability.[149] The Senate agreed to permit the Air Force to retire 18 B-52 aircraft, but stated that it expected no further reduction in the size of the force, noting that a further reductions might "prevent our ability to strike the required conventional target set during times of war."[150] The conference committee (H.R. 5122, §131) combined these two provisions, allowing the retirement of no more than 18 aircraft after the submission of a report, and mandating that the Air Force retain at least 44 "combat coded" aircraft.

In testimony before the Armed Services Committee in 2007, the Air Force indicated that it still planned to reduce the B-52 fleet to 56 aircraft, with 32 combat coded aircraft included in the fleet. But, in recognition of the congressional mandate, it was seeking a way to maintain 44 combat coded aircraft, the minimum set by Congress, within the smaller fleet of 56 aircraft. It also stated that it planned to store the 20 aircraft it wanted to retire in FY2008 on ramps at Barksdale Air Force Base; the aircraft would be kept in serviceable condition, but would not receive any

[147] Hans M. Kristensen and Matt Korda, "United States Nuclear Forces, 2020," https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/full/10.1080/00963402.2019.1701286.

[148] U.S. Senate, Committee on Armed Services, Hearing on Global Strike Plans and Programs. Testimony of James E. Cartwright, Commander U.S. Strategic Command. March 29, 2006.

[149] U.S. Congress. House. Committee on Armed Services. National Defense Authorization Act for Fiscal Year 2007. H.Rept. 109-452. May 5, 2006. p. 103.

[150] U.S. Congress Senate. National Defense Authorization Act for Fiscal Year 2007. S.Rept. 109-254. May 9, 2006. p. 94.

capabilities upgrades.[151] Congress once again rejected this proposal. In the FY2008 Defense Authorization Bill (H.R. 1585, §137), Congress mandated that the Air Force maintain a fleet of 74 B-52 bombers. The conference committee indicated that the members agreed that a fleet of fewer than 76 aircraft would be insufficient to meet long-range strike requirements.

The growing interest in long-range strike capabilities, and the continuing addition of precision conventional weapons to these aircraft, demonstrates that the Pentagon and STRATCOM view the U.S. bomber fleet as essential to U.S. conventional weapons capabilities. Further, the need for long-range strike capabilities, rather than an interest in maintaining the nuclear role for bombers,[152] appeared to be driving decisions about the size and structure of the bomber fleet. There are some indications that, during the discussions on the 2006 QDR, some in the Pentagon argued that the all the B-52 bombers should be removed from the nuclear mission. Moreover, in November 2008, Secretary of the Air Force Michael Donley noted that the role that the bombers play in nuclear deterrence could be reduced in the future, if the United States and Russia negotiate further reductions in their nuclear arsenals.

This focus began to shift, however, in 2008. Studies have noted that a lack of attention paid in the Air Force and, more broadly, in DOD, to the bombers' nuclear mission seems to be one of the factors that led to the episode in August 2007, when a B-52 bomber flew from Minot to Barksdale with six cruise missiles that carried live nuclear warheads.[153] As is discussed in more detail below, the Air Force is pursuing a number of organizational and procedural changes to increase its focus on the nuclear mission and "reinvigorate" its nuclear enterprise. It has "stood-up" a B-52 bomber squadron that will focus specifically on the nuclear mission.[154] This unit added 10 bombers to the 12 already deployed at Minot. While all the B-52 bomber crews and aircraft will retain their nuclear roles, this added squadron will participate in a greater number of nuclear exercises and training missions. The aircraft in the squadron will rotate from other missions, but will remain designated as the nuclear squadron for full year. The Air Force hopes this construct will improve not only the operational proficiency of the crews, but also their morale and their confidence in the value of the nuclear mission.

With this change, Secretary of Defense Gates stated, in April 2009, that the Air Force planned to retain 76 B-52 bombers. The 2010 Nuclear Posture Review determined that the Air Force would retain nuclear-capable bombers, but it would also convert some B-52s to a conventional-only role. In the report on the New START force structure issued in April 2014, the Obama Administration indicated that the United States would retain 42 deployed and 4 nondeployed nuclear capable B-52 bombers. The remainder of the B-52 bombers would be converted to carry only conventional weapons. In September 2015, the Air Force announced that it had begun to convert a portion of the B-52H bomber force from nuclear to conventional-only capability, thus removing 30 operational bombers from accountability under New START.[155] The database released after the March 2017 New START data exchange shows that the Air Force now has

[151] U.S. Congress. Senate. Armed Services Committee, Subcommittee on Strategic Forces. Hearing on the Fiscal Year 2008 Strategic Forces Program Budget. Statement of Major General Roger Burg. March 28, 2007. p. 8.

[152] Carlo Munoz, "Donley: Role of Nuclear Bomber Fleet Could Be Curtailed," *Inside the Air Force*, November 14, 2008.

[153] For a detailed review of this incident see, Warrick, Joby and Walter Pincus. The Saga of a Bent Spear. *Washington Post*, September 23, 2007.

[154] Marcus Weisgerber, "USAF To Activate Rotational Nuclear Bomber Squadron Next Month," *Inside Defense*, September 26, 2008.

[155] Department of Defense, Air Force Global Strike Command, AFGSC Completes First New START Bomber Conversion, September 17, 2015.

converted 41 bombers conventional-only capability, which removes them from accountability under New START.

Long-Range Standoff (LRSO) Weapons

At the end of the Cold War, the B-52 bomber was equipped to carry both the Air-Launched cruise missile (ALCM) and Advanced Cruise Missile (ACM). The ACM reportedly had a modified design with a lower radar cross-section, making it more "stealthy" than the ALCM. According to Air Force figures, in 2006, the United States had 1,142 ALCMs and 394 ACMs.[156] Although these weapons represented a majority of the weapons that U.S. bombers could carry on nuclear missions, the Department of Defense decided to retire many of these missiles. In his statement to the Senate Armed Services Committee's Subcommittee on Strategic Forces, Major General Roger Burg indicated that this study had concluded, and the Secretary of Defense had directed, that the Air Force retire all the Advanced Cruise Missiles, although some could be converted to carry conventional warheads, and reduce the ALCM fleet to 528 cruise missiles. The excess ALCMs would also be eliminated, with the remaining missiles consolidated at Minot Air Force Base. With all the ALCMs consolidated at Minot Air Force Base, the bombers at Barksdale may no longer be included in the nuclear mission.

The Air Force plans to sustain the ALCM in the fleet through 2030. It is then planning to replace the ALCM with a new advanced long range standoff (LRSO) cruise missile. It completed an analysis of alternatives (AOA) for this system to "define the platform requirements, provide cost-sensitive comparisons, validate threats, and establish measures of effectiveness, and assess candidate systems for eventual procurement and production" of the new missile.[157] The DOD budget request for FY2014 contained $5 million for the Air Force to begin systems engineering support for the program. The budget also indicated that the technology development phase would begin in FY2014, and that the funding requests could reach a total of $1 billion through FY2014.

In the FY2015 budget request, DOD indicated that the plans for the LRSO missile had slipped by three years. This change was the result of fiscal constraints and the need to fund higher priorities elsewhere in the nuclear force. As a result, although the Air Force requested only $4.9 million for this program in FY2015, it indicated that it would spend $221 million over the next five years. Congress expressed concerns with this plan in the FY2015 National Defense Authorization Act (P.L. 113-291, §143), noting that the existing ALCMs were, on average, over 30 years old and that the capabilities provided by the cruise missile were "critical to maintaining a credible and effective air-delivery leg of the nuclear triad." The legislation requested a report on the status of the current cruise missile and the development of the new LRSO missile.

In its FY2016 budget request, the Air Force added funding for the LRSO to accelerate the program by two years, seeking to begin deployments in the mid-2020s. According to testimony, the Air Force had placed a higher priority on this program because the existing ALCM had been through several life extension programs and was beginning to show reliability problems. According to Frank Kendall, the Under Secretary of Defense for AT&L, this was making the ALCM more difficult to maintain.[158] Where the Air Force requested only $3.4 million for this

[156] The Air Force also has 289 ALCMs that have been converted to carry conventional warheads (CALCMs). See Michael Sirak. DOD Studies Future Role of Nuclear-Armed Cruise Missiles. Defense Daily, March 30, 2006.

[157] Department of Defense, *November 2010 Update to the National Defense Authorization Act of FY2010*, New START Treaty Framework and Nuclear Force Structure Plans, Washington, DC, November 17, 2010, p. 12. http://www.lasg.org/CMRR/Sect1251_update_17Nov2010.pdf.

[158] U.S. Congress, Senate Committee on Armed Services, Subcommittee on Strategic Forces, *President Obama's Fiscal 2016 Budget Request for the U.S. Nuclear Weapons Policy, Programs and Strategy*, Hearing, 114th Cong., 1st sess., March 4, 2014.

program in FY2015, it requested $36.6 million in FY2016. DOD expected this funding to increase rapidly, to a total of nearly $1.8 billion between FY2016 and FY2020.

Congress appropriated only $16.4 million for the LRSO in FY2016, reducing the request by $20.5 million due to delays in the award of the contract that reduced the budget requirements for the program. The Air Force requested $95.6 million for the LRSO in FY2017; Congress approved this amount FY2017 National Defense Authorization Act (P.L. 114-328). When it submitted its FY2017 budget, the Air Force indicated that it would request $419.8 million in FY2018 and a total of $2.1 billion between FY2018 and FY2021. The FY2018 budget request, however, included $451.2 million for the LRSO and indicated that the Air Force planned to request over $2.6 billion between FY2018 and FY2022. Congress approved the FY2018 request in the National Defense Authorization Act for FY2018 (P.L. 115-91).

The Air Force requested $615 million for the LRSO in FY2019. The FY2019 budget documents indicate that the funding increase from FY2018 to FY2019 occurred due to a "ramp up" in Technology Maturation and Risk Reduction phase (TMRR), during which the contractors will "continue to design, develop, integrate and test the LRSO system" to meet "validated requirements prior to the engineering & manufacturing phase." The Air Force requested $712.5 million for the LRSO in its FY2020 budget; Congress enacted this amount in the FY2020 National Defense Authorization Act (P.L. 116-92). The Air Force requested $474.4 million for the LRSO in its FY2021 budget. This is consistent with the level of funding for FY2021 expected in the FY2020 budget. Congress authorized $384.7 million for this program in the FY2021 NDAA Conference Report (H.Rept. 116-617).

The Air Force has requested $609 million for the LRSO in FY2022, an increase of $250 million over the amount enacted in FY2021. The Air Force budget documents indicate that this increase is needed to support program requirements.

In 2017, the Air Force awarded contracts to both Raytheon and Lockheed Martin to execute the LRSO Technology Maturation and Risk Reduction (TMRR) phase of the LRSO program. The TMRR phase was due to run for 4½ years, with the selection of a single contractor due to occur in FY2022, at the start of the engineering and manufacturing development phase. Nevertheless, in April 2020 the Air Force announced that LRSO development would continue with Raytheon Company as a sole-source contractor.[159] In a statement, the Air Force indicated that it had decided to focus on Raytheon's design because the competitive TMRR phase "enabled us to select a high-confidence design at this point in the acquisition process."[160] The Air Force indicated that it had not really down-selected to a single contractor, but that Lockheed Martin would still be involved in maturing some of the technologies and might still have a role in future upgrades of the system.[161]

In early July 2021, the Air Force announced that it has awarded Raytheon a $2 billion contract for the engineering and manufacturing development stage of the LRSO program. According to the

[159] Valerie Insinna, "The Air Force made a surprise decision to sole-source the Long Range Standoff Weapon. Here's who will move forward," *Defense News*, April 17, 2020, https://www.defensenews.com/smr/nuclear-arsenal/2020/04/20/the-air-force-made-a-surprise-decision-to-sole-source-the-long-range-standoff-weapon-heres-who-will-move-forward/.

[160] Leah Bryant, *Air Force selects single contractor for long-range standoff nuclear weapon*, Air Force Nuclear Weapons Center, Kirtland Air Force Base, NM, April 17, 2020, https://www.afnwc.af.mil/News/Article/2155284/air-force-selects-single-contractor-for-long-range-standoff-nuclear-weapon/.

[161] John A. Tirpak, "Lockheed May Still Play a Role in Upgrading Raytheon LRSO, Once it's Operational," *Air Force Magazine*, April 21, 2020, https://www.airforcemag.com/lockheed-may-still-play-a-role-in-upgrading-raytheon-lrso-once-its-operational/.

Air Force announcement, manufacturing processes will continue to mature during this phase, with the "objective at the end of EMD is to demonstrate full production readiness."[162]

NNSA is conducting a life-extension program on the W80 warhead, which will be carried by the LRSO. Its plans for the W80-4 warhead had slipped in the FY2015 budget, with the Nuclear Weapons Council delaying the first production unit from 2024 until the 2025-2027 timeframe. Congress, in the FY2015 National Defense Authorization Act, mandated that NNSA deliver the first production unit of this new warhead by 2025 (P.L. 113-291, §3119). In its FY2016 budget request, NNSA indicated that it had allocated the resources necessary to meet this requirement, and to align the warhead life extension program with the plan to field the first LRSO missile in FY2026. Congress appropriated $195 million for the W80-4 life extension program in FY2016 and $220 million in FY2017. NNSA requested $399 million for FY2018 and $666.4 million in FY2019.

NNSA requested 898.6 million for the W80-4 in FY2020, an increase of 37% over the $654.8 million enacted in FY2019. Congress approved this request in the FY2020 National Defense Authorization Act (P.L. 116-92). NNSA has requested $1 billion for the W80-4 warhead in FY2021; Congress authorized this amount. According to its budget documents, NNSA has begun to "ramp up engineering activities for development and design on the W80-4," and the significant increases in the budget request for FY2020 and FY2021 reflect an increase in the scope of work on the program. NNSA has requested $1.1 billion for the W80-4 in FY2021. The first production unit is scheduled for FY2025, with program completion expected in FY2031.

According to press reports, the Air Force plans to buy a total of 1,000-1,100 new cruise missiles through the LRSO program, at a cost of around $10.8 billion, with the first missile slated for completion in 2026.[163] This total would support the testing program and deployment plans over the life of the missile.

The LRSO program has attracted attention and significant debate among analysts outside government and several Members of Congress. Some have questioned whether the Air Force needed to accelerate the LRSO program and whether the United States needs and can afford to develop and produce a new cruise missile in the coming decade. They questioned whether the capabilities provided by the LRSO may be redundant, as the Air Force is also developing a new penetrating bomber and proceeding with the life extension program for the B61 bomb. Moreover, they noted that the Air Force also has conventional cruise missiles that could destroy critical targets from beyond the reach of an adversary's air defenses.[164]

During testimony before both the House and Senate Armed Services Committees in 2015, Admiral Haney, the Commander of Strategic Command (STRATCOM), noted that the LRSO is "important from a deterrence and warfighting requirement" because it will provide Air Force bombers with a "standoff capability" now and into the future. He noted that this standoff capability will remain important because as more countries develop advanced air defenses, those defenses will provide them with "anti-access/access denial" capabilities. Admiral Haney and others have responded by noting that the capabilities are not redundant, but are complementary, because they provide the President with more flexibility and more options in the event of a crisis.

---

[162] U.S Department of Defense, *Contracts for July 1, 2021*, Washington, DC, July 1, 2021, https://www.defense.gov/Newsroom/Contracts/Contract/Article/2680485/.

[163] Kingston Reif, "Air Force Wants 1,000 New Cruise Missiles," *Arms Control Today*, May 2015.

[164] Council for a Liveable World. The Center for Arms Control and Non-Proliferation, *Is a New Cruise Missile Necessary?*, Fact Sheet, Washington, DC, February 2, 2016, http://armscontrolcenter.org/is-a-new-nuclear-cruise-missile-necessary/.

In a letter to Senator Sanders in February 2016, Brian McKeon, the Principal Deputy Under Secretary of Defense, elaborated on this point, noting that

> Cruise missiles provide capabilities that complement rather than duplicate that of a stealth bomber. Standoff capability improves the survivability of our bomber fleet, extends its effective range, and multiplies the type and number of penetrating targets each bomber presents to the adversary. This complicates the air defense problem facing any country seeking to negate this portion of our deterrent.

Lieutenant General (retired) David Deptula made a similar point when he noted that "LRSO will act as a force multiplier augmenting the long-range bomber force and appreciably complicating an adversary's ability to defend its airspace." He indicated that the weapons could "significantly increase the reach and target coverage" of U.S. bombers and "amplify" the challenge to enemy air defenses "posed by a combined force of stealth bombers and LRSO." This would make "countermeasures both more costly and problematical for the adversary and thus enhances deterrence."[165]

B-21 Bomber

As the preceding discussion noted, the United States currently deploys two types of heavy bombers—the B-2 and B-52—that can deliver both nuclear and conventional weapons. A third bomber, the B-1, was initially equipped to deliver nuclear weapons but is now exclusively dedicated to conventional missions. The Air Force has employed all three aircraft in conventional conflicts over the past two decades, and all have received upgrades to sustain their capabilities, but all three are aging and, according to many in the Air Force, may not be sufficient to meet emerging challenges.

As a result, the Air Force has also begun develop a new strategic bomber, now known as the B-21 Raider. When it began this effort more than a decade ago, it hoped to introduce the new bomber into the fleet around 2018. At the time, it was seeking a bomber with not only stealth capabilities and long range, but also one with "persistence," one that could "stay airborne and on call for very long periods."[166] However, the start of the study on a new bomber, known as an Analysis of Alternatives (AOA), was delayed by a dispute over whether the study should stand alone or be merged with another AOA on prompt global strike (PGS) capabilities, such as hypersonic technologies and missiles.[167] General James Cartwright, the former head of STRATCOM, reportedly supported a plan to merge the two efforts, so that the considerations of capabilities for a new bomber would be measured alongside other systems, both to balance the force and avoid redundancy across the force.[168] On the other hand, the former Air Force Chief of Staff, General T. Michael Moseley, reportedly preferred to keep the two studies separate. He argued that a bomber with long-range strike capabilities must have "persistent, survivable, and penetrating capabilities" while a platform with PGS capabilities could be a "standoff weapon that is very, very fast."[169]

---

[165] Lt. Gen. Dave Deptula, "Stealthy New Nuclear Cruise Missile Aims to Deter the Enemy," *The Cipher Brief*, August 8, 2017, https://www.thecipherbrief.com/article/north-america/stealthy-new-nuclear-cruise-missile-aims-deter-enemy?utm_source=Join+the+Community+Subscribers&utm_campaign=a20baac8c6-EMAIL_CAMPAIGN_2017_08_08&utm_medium=email&utm_term=0_02cbee778d-a20baac8c6-122497273.

[166] Christie, Rebecca. Air Force To Step Up New Bomber Search in Next Budget. *Wall Street Journal*. June 29, 2006.

[167] For details on these types of systems, see CRS Report R41464, *Conventional Prompt Global Strike and Long-Range Ballistic Missiles: Background and Issues*, by Amy F. Woolf.

[168] Grossman, Elaine M. Cartwright Wants to See Strike Studies Await "Discovery" Process. *InsideDefense.com*, April 6, 2006.

[169] Bennet, John T. Internal Squabbles Holding Up Bomber Study, USAF Official Says. *InsideDefense.com*, April 21,

This position reportedly prevailed, with the Air Force deciding, in May 2006, to keep the two studies separate.[170]

This dispute revealed wide-ranging differences, within the Air Force and Pentagon, about the goals for and capabilities that should be sought in a new bomber program.[171] The dispute focused, however, on conventional capabilities; it seemed to be almost a foregone conclusion that nuclear capabilities, or the need for a bomber leg of the nuclear triad, would not drive the discussion or analysis. This position is still evident, with the Air Force seeking a new bomber to meet conventional challenges, and considering delaying the introduction of nuclear capabilities to save money. But disagreements over the capabilities needed, even for the conventional mission, served to delay the new bomber program by several years.

In May 2007, the Air Force indicated that it had decided that the next generation bomber would be manned and subsonic, although it would incorporate some stealth characteristics.[172] It decided that it would not pursue supersonic capabilities, or an unmanned option, to contain costs and maintain the capabilities of the future aircraft. However, on April 6, 2009, in a briefing describing the FY2010 defense budget, Secretary of Defense Robert Gates delayed the program and indicated that the Air Force would not proceed until it had "a better understanding of the need, the requirement and the technology."[173] He suspended the program until DOD completed the QDR and 2010 Nuclear Posture Review.

The 2010 Quadrennial Defense Review (QDR) indicated that the Air Force was "reviewing options for fielding survivable, long-range surveillance and strike aircraft as part of a comprehensive, phased plan to modernize the bomber force."[174] The report also noted that Secretary of Defense Gates ordered a follow-on study to the QDR to determine "what combination of joint persistent surveillance, electronic warfare, and precision-attack capabilities, including both penetrating platforms and stand-off weapons, will best support U.S. power projection operations over the next two to three decades." Secretary Gates indicated that he expected the Air Force to field the next generation bomber in the late 2020s.[175]

In a report submitted to the Senate in late 2010, the Obama Administration emphasized that the United States would maintain the bomber leg of the strategic triad and that DOD was committed to modernizing the bomber force. The report noted that the long-range strike study was assessing "the appropriate type of bomber and the timelines for development, production, and deployment."[176] Secretary Gates confirmed this approach in January 2011, when he announced

2006.

[170] Matishak, Martin. Long-Range, Prompt Global Strike Studies Will Remain Separate. *InsideDefense.com*, June 16, 2006.

[171] For more details on the proposed bomber, see CRS Report RL34406, *Air Force Next-Generation Bomber: Background and Issues for Congress*, by Jeremiah Gertler.

[172] Sirak, Michael. Air Force Identifies Manned, Subsonic Bomber as Most Promising 2018 Option. Defense Today. May 2, 2007.

[173] Department of Defense, *Briefing by Defense Secretary Robert Gates and Marine Corps Gen. James Cartwright, Vice Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff*, Washington, DC, April 6, 2009, http://insidedefense.com/secure/data_extra/html3/dplus2009_0893_3.htm.

[174] Department of Defense, *Quadrennial Defense Review Report*, Washington, DC, February 2010, p. 33, http://archive.defense.gov/qdr/QDR%20as%20of%2029JAN10%201600.pdf.

[175] Andrea Shalal-Esa, "Gates Sees New U.S. Bomber Fielded in 2020s," *Reuters*, February 2, 2010.

[176] Department of Defense, *November 2010 Update to the National Defense Authorization Act of FY2010*, New START Treaty Framework and Nuclear Force Structure Plans, Washington, DC, November 17, 2010, p. 11, http://www.lasg.org/CMRR/Sect1251_update_17Nov2010.pdf.

the Air Force would develop a new bomber "using proven technologies," and that this bomber would be nuclear-capable.[177]

Air Force officials have indicated that they hope to field between 80 and 100 of the new bombers, now known as the B-21, with the first to enter service around 2025. It also indicated that it planned to hold the procurement cost for each bomber to $550 million, with the total cost of the program to reach $36-$56 billion. However, it acknowledged, in 2014, that this cost did not include research and development funding,[178] which, according to some estimates, could amount to between $20 billion and $45 billion if the program follows the trends set by previous bomber programs.[179] The per-unit cost would also rise if the Air Force were to buy fewer than the planned 80-100 bombers. As a result, many analysts agree that the final cost of the bomber could reach $60-$80 billion.

Congress appropriated $259 million for R&D on this aircraft in FY2013, $359.4 million in FY2014, and $913.7 million in FY2015. These requests were sufficient to keep the bomber program on track but led to Air Force spending levels that exceeded the levels set by the 2011 Budget Control Act. According to one analysis at the time, the Air Force would likely need to reduce its other acquisition programs to find the "budget headroom" for this program.[180] The Air Force requested $1.3 billion for FY2016, but Congress appropriated only $736 million. According to Air Force budget documents, this reduction reflected schedule delays in the program and the awarding of the contract.

The Air Force announced on October 27, 2015, that it had awarded the initial contract, which includes the production of 21 bombers, to Northrup Grumman. Analysts believe this contract is worth more than $20 billion, but that the total cost of the program could reach $80 billion for 100 aircraft.[181] This total includes development costs and the expected cost of $511 million (in 2010 dollars) for each of the 100 bombers. This represents a small reduction from the target cost of $550 million per bomber. The lower expected cost of the bombers was reflected in the Air Force budget request for FY2017, when the Air Force requested $1.4 billion for the B-21 instead of the $2.2 billion that it had expected for FY2017 as noted in the FY2016 budget documents. Congress further reduced this amount, authorizing $1.05 billion in the FY2017 National Defense Authorization Act (P.L. 114-328). The FY2017 Air Force budget also noted that the Air Force planned to request $12.1 billion between FY2017 and FY2021, as opposed to the $15.6 billion expected over five years in the FY2016 budget request. The Air Force indicated that these reductions reflected revised cost estimates following the award of the B-21 contract in late 2015.[182] ;

The Air Force requested $2 billion for the B-21 bomber in its FY2018 budget, $2.3 billion in FY2019, and 3 billion in FY2020. Congress approved most of the requested funding during these years, although the FY2019 Defense Appropriations bill funded the program at $2.28 billion. The

[177] Marcus Weisgerber, "Air Force To Develop New Long-Range, Optionally Manned Bomber," *Inside the Air Force*, January 6, 2011.

[178] Aaron Mehta, "USAF General: "Of Course" Bomber Will Be More Than $550M per Copy," *Defense News*, March 5, 2014.

[179] Jon B. Wolfsthal, Jeffrey Lewis, and Marc Quint, *The Trillion Dollar Nuclear Triad*, James Martin Center for Nonproliferation Studies, Monterey, CA, January 2014, pp. 18-19. http://www.nonproliferation.org/wp-content/uploads/2016/04/140107_trillion_dollar_nuclear_triad.pdf.

[180] Colin Clark, "LRS-B, Next Boomer May Force Weapons Cuts," *Breaking Defense*, September 4, 2014.

[181] Doug Cameron, "Northrop Grumman Wins Long-Range Bomber Deal," *Wall Street Journal*, October 27, 2015.

[182] Kingston Reif, "Budget Would Raise Nuclear Spending," *Arms Control Today*, March 2016.

Air Force requested $2.8 billion for the B-21 in its FY2021 budget;[183] Congress authorized this amount in the FY2021 NDAA Conference Report (H.Rept. 116-617). The Air Force has requested $2.9 billion for the B-21 in its FY2022 budget.

Sustaining the Nuclear Weapons Enterprise

In late August 2007, a B-52 bomber based in Minot, ND, took off on a flight to Barksdale Air Force Base in Louisiana. The bomber carried 12 air-launched cruise missiles that were slated for retirement at Barksdale. As a result of a series of errors and missteps in the process of removing the missiles from storage and loading them on the bombers, six of the missiles carried live nuclear warheads, instead of the dummy warheads that were installed on missiles heading for retirement. This episode was the first of many that have led to questions about the capabilities management of the U.S. nuclear weapons enterprise. It led to a series of studies and reviews by the Air Force that identified the source of the episode and identified a number of steps the Air Force should take to improve its handling of nuclear weapons.[184] These studies were followed, in 2014, by additional studies and a number of changes designed to raise morale and the quality of life for servicemembers in the nuclear enterprise.

In early June 2008, Secretary of Defense Robert Gates requested the resignations of the Secretary of the Air Force, Michael Wynne, and the Chief of Staff of the Air Force, General Michael Mosely, from their positions, at least in part, due to concerns that shortcomings in the Air Force's handling of nuclear weapons "resulted from an erosion of performance standards within the involved commands and a lack of effective Air Force leadership oversight."[185] Secretary Gates appointed a task force, led by former Secretary of Defense and Energy James Schlesinger, to provide "independent advice on the organizational, procedural and policy improvements necessary to ensure that the highest levels of accountability and control are maintained in the department's stewardship of nuclear weapons, delivery vehicles, sensitive components and basing procedures."[186]

Several of the studies that reviewed this event concluded that the Air Force leadership had lost its focus on the nuclear mission as it diverted resources to more pressing missions related to the ongoing conflicts in Iraq and Afghanistan. As a result, the "nuclear enterprise" had been allowed to atrophy, with evident declines in morale, cohesion, and capability.[187] These reports suggested that the United States restore its focus on the nuclear mission and repair long-standing and often-identified deficiencies in manpower and training programs for crews that maintain and service nuclear weapons and operate nuclear-capable bombers. The studies identified a number of organizational changes to achieve these goals. For example, the Air Force has created a new Global Strike Command, based at Barksdale Air Force Base, that is responsible for both the

[183] For details on the B-21 bomber, see CRS Report R44463, *Air Force B-21 Raider Long-Range Strike Bomber*, by Jeremiah Gertler.

[184] See, for example, The Defense Science Board Permanent Task Force on Nuclear Weapons Surety. Report on the Unauthorized Movement of Nuclear Weapons. February 2008.

[185] Nuclear Lapses Trigger Ouster of Top U.S. Air Force Officials. Global Security Newswire. June 6, 2008.

[186] Department of Defense. Office of the Assistant Secretary of Defense (Public Affairs), "Department of Defense Announces Task Force on Nuclear Weapons Management," June 12, 2008.

[187] See, for example, United States Air Force, *Reinvigorating the Air Force Nuclear Enterprise*, Prepared by the Air Force Nuclear Task Force, Washington, DC, October 24, 2008, https://fas.org/irp/doddir/usaf/nuclear.pdf. See also, Report of the Secretary of Defense Task Force on DOD Nuclear Weapons Management (the Schlesinger Commission), *Phase I: The Air Force's Nuclear Mission,* Washington, DC, September 2008, http://www.defenselink.mil/pubs/Phase_I_Report_Sept_10.pdf.

ICBM force and the nuclear-capable bombers. This organization began its operations in early 2009. The Air Force has also established a new headquarters office in the Pentagon that will monitor and manage the resources and policies dedicated to the nuclear mission. The Air Force also altered its inspection program and its expectations for achievement during these inspections.

In a study published in April 2011, the Defense Science Board reviewed and evaluated the changes Air Force had made in its nuclear weapons enterprise.[188] The report noted that Air Force leadership "has taken decisive action to correct deficiencies, reinvigorate, and further strengthen the Air Force Nuclear Enterprise."[189] At the same time, though, the study noted that some of the "extraordinary measures" taken in response to the earlier lapses could have negative impacts if they are extended beyond the "period of urgent need." This problem was particularly evident in the areas of oversight and inspection. The study reported that there has been "intense attention to the issue of accountability and control of nuclear weapons-related materials." But the numerous and overlapping inspections have become so frequent and invasive that the units may not have the time or resources to correct deficiencies found during the many inspections. As a result, the task force concluded that the intense level of inspections and exercises had become counterproductive by interfering with the normal rhythm of operations at the wings.[190]

Several incidents that occurred in 2013 and early 2014 raised new concerns about the capabilities and morale of ICBM launch officers. For example, press reports from May 2013 noted that the Air Force had removed 17 launch officers from duty at Minot Air Force Base and had sent them for additional training after they earned low scores on an inspection in March.[191] In August, a missile unit at Malmstrom Air Force Base also received a failing grade on an inspection. Air Force officials expressed concern about these results, but noted that they remained confident in the capabilities of Air Force nuclear officers. After the incident in Minot, some saw the commander's response, and the remedial action, as a sign of progress in the force, because problems were identified and corrected on site. Others have noted that unsatisfactory results in inspections may be the result of higher expectations, and do not necessarily indicate deeper problems. Others, however, view the low scores on inspections as a symptom of continuing problems in the force.

In January 2014, press reports indicated that nuclear launch officers at Malmstrom Air Force Base had been implicated in a drug investigation. While investigating this charge, the Air Force discovered that 34 of launch officers may have been cheating on their monthly proficiency exams. In response to this event, Secretary of Defense Hagel ordered an internal review of nuclear weapons personnel issues and commissioned another outside study of morale and effectiveness in the nuclear enterprise. As this review proceeded, the Air Force questioned whether some officers in the nuclear force may be experiencing "burnout" and boredom in a mission that seemed connected to an earlier time and whether the tense atmosphere created by the frequent testing and inspection regimes has created incentives to cheat to produce perfect scores.[192]

---

[188] Defense Science Board Permanent Task Force on Nuclear Weapons Surety, *Independent Assessment of The Air force Nuclear Enterprise,* Washington, DC, April 2011, https://apps.dtic.mil/dtic/tr/fulltext/u2/a552762.pdf.

[189] Ibid., p. 16.

[190] Ibid., pp. 22-23.

[191] Robert Burns, "Air Force Sidelines 17 ICBM launch officers: commander cites 'rot' within system," *Associated Press,* May 8, 2013.

[192] R. Jeffrey Smith, "Aiming High: Boredom, Drugs, Low Morale. The millennials of the U.S. nuclear missile corps are struggling to stay on high alert for a nuclear Armageddon," *Slate,* April 2014.

The Air Force responded to these problems with plans to increase funding by nearly $8 billion over five years, beginning in FY2015, to raise pay levels, introduce new management positions, modify the testing process, and raise morale among Air Force ICBM officers. In its FY2018 budget request, the Air Force indicated that it planned to spend an additional $3 billion over the next five years. Many of these plans are designed to highlight the high value that Air Force places on the ICBM mission and to convince airmen that their leaders value their effort and accomplishment. At the same time, though, the changes will require additional funding, and the Air Force will need to request increases in its budget in an era of fiscal restraint to follow through on these initiatives.

While the Air Force has increased funding and altered testing and training procedures to address many of these concerns, the Department of Defense has also sought to emphasize the value and priority placed on this mission within the department. For example, Secretary of Defense Ashton Carter visited Minot Air Force Base in September 2016, when he noted that "America's nuclear deterrence is the bedrock of our security, and the highest priority mission of the Department of Defense."[193] Secretary of Defense Mark T. Esper conducted a similar visit to Minot in February 2020. In his comments, he noted that "the nuclear strategic triad is the most important part of our military … it provides that strategic nuclear deterrent that we depend on day after day, that we've depended on decade after decade."[194]

In April 2020, the Pentagon outlined its plans to maintain the capabilities and readiness of the nuclear enterprise during the Covid-19 pandemic. On April 22, General John Hyten, the Vice-chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, announced that the Pentagon would expand its testing program for the virus using a four-tier system, with forces involved "in critical national capabilities such as strategic deterrence or nuclear deterrence" included in the first tier.[195] The Air Force and Navy also outlined plans to monitor and quarantine airmen and sailors prior to their deployments to maintain deterrence and minimize the risk to force. Analysts have noted that some of these steps may have been easier to implement in the nuclear weapons community because it is designed to work autonomously and in isolation so that it can "keep operating even in the aftermath a nuclear conflict or amid a biological weapons attack."[196]

Issues for Congress

This report focuses on the numbers and types of weapons in the U.S. strategic nuclear force structure. It does not address the broader question of why the United States chooses to deploy these numbers and types of weapons, or more generally, the role that U.S. nuclear weapons play in U.S. national security strategy. However, as the Biden Administration reviews and possibly

[193] Ashton Carter, *Sustaining Nuclear Deterrence*, U.S. Department of Defense, Remarks, Minot, ND, September 26, 2016, https://www.defense.gov/Newsroom/Speeches/Speech/Article/956630/remarks-on-sustaining-nuclear-deterrence/.

[194] Secretary of Defense Mark T. Esper, *Media Availability at Minot AFB*, Department of Defense, Minot, ND, February 19, 2020, https://www.defense.gov/Newsroom/Transcripts/Transcript/Article/2088918/secretary-of-defense-dr-mark-t-esper-media-availability-at-minot-afb/.

[195] Jim Garamone, "DOD Starts Tiered COVID-19 Testing Process to Ensure Safety," *DOD News*, April 22, 2020, https://www.defense.gov/Explore/News/Article/Article/2160008/dod-starts-tiered-covid-19-testing-process-to-ensure-safety/.

[196] Bryan Bender, "How the nuclear force dodged the coronavirus," *Politico*, April 23, 2020, https://www.politico.com/news/2020/04/23/nuclear-force-coronavirus-205230?utm_source=Sailthru&utm_medium=email&utm_campaign=EBB%2004.24.20&utm_term=Editorial%20-%20Early%20Bird%20Brief.

revises the plans for U.S. nuclear force structure, Congress could address broader questions about the relationship between these forces and the role of nuclear weapons.

Force Size

As noted above, the United States has reduced the size of its nuclear arsenal significantly since the end of the Cold War, with a combination of changes in threat assessments and arms control limits reducing the number of warheads deployed on long-range delivery vehicles by over 80%. Growing concerns, however, about emerging challenges from Russia and China, along with the absence of negotiations on further arms control agreements, have raised questions about whether the United States should alter the numbers of deployed nuclear warheads.

In 2001, the Bush Administration argued that, because the United States and Russia were no longer enemies, the United States would not size or structure its nuclear forces simply to deter the "Russian threat." Instead, nuclear weapons would play a broader role in U.S. national security strategy. The Obama Administration, in contrast, noted that there was a relationship between the size of the U.S. arsenal and the size of the Russian arsenal. The 2010 NPR states that

> Russia's nuclear force will remain a significant factor in determining how much and how fast we are prepared to reduce U.S. forces. Because of our improved relations, the need for strict numerical parity between the two countries is no longer as compelling as it was during the Cold War. But large disparities in nuclear capabilities could raise concerns on both sides and among U.S. allies and partners, and may not be conducive to maintaining a stable, long-term strategic relationship, especially as nuclear forces are significantly reduced.[197]

The Trump Administration, in the 2018 Nuclear Posture Review, reaffirmed the relationship between the U.S. nuclear force posture and emerging threats, stating that the "global threat conditions have worsened markedly since the most recent, 2010 NPR." It emphasized that "Russia and China are contesting the international norms" and that "Russia and North Korea have increased the salience of nuclear forces in their strategies and plans and have engaged in increasingly explicit nuclear threats." As a result, it stated that the 2018 NPR "provides guidance for the nuclear force structure and policy requirements needed now and in the future to maintain peace and stability in a rapidly shifting environment with significant future uncertainty."[198]

The Bush Administration's 2001 Nuclear Posture Review determined that the United States would need to maintain between 1,700 and 2,200 operationally deployed nuclear warheads. At the same time, it indicated that the United States would maintain in storage many of the warheads removed from deployed forces, and would maintain the capability to restore some of these warheads to the deployed forces to meet unexpected contingencies. The Obama Administration concluded, in its NPR, that the United States could reduce its forces to 1,550 deployed warheads, and agreed to do so under the New START Treaty, but it also planned to retain the capability to restore warheads to its deployed forces and planned to retain many warheads in storage.[199]

---

[197] Department of Defense, *Nuclear Posture Review*, Washington, DC, April 6, 2010, p. 30, https://dod.defense.gov/Portals/1/features/defenseReviews/NPR/2010_Nuclear_Posture_Review_Report.pdf.

[198] Department of Defense, *Nuclear Posture Review*, Washington, DC, February 2, 2018, pp. 2-3, https://media.defense.gov/2018/Feb/02/2001872886/-1/-1/1/2018-NUCLEAR-POSTURE-REVIEW-FINAL-REPORT.PDF.

[199] On May 3, 2010, the Obama Administration announced that the United States has 5,113 warheads in its stockpile of nuclear weapons. This number includes the deployed warheads, active nondeployed warheads and inactive nondeployed warheads. For more information, see http://www.defense.gov/npr/docs/10-05-03_Fact_Sheet_US_Nuclear_Transparency__FINAL_w_Date.pdf.

In 2013, the Obama Administration determined that the United States could reduce its numbers of deployed and nondeployed warheads further, but would only do so in parallel with Russia. In June 2013, the Department of Defense completed a new study, as a follow-up to the NPR, to determine how deeply the United States might reduce its forces, and how it should deploy the remaining forces. Press reports indicate the Pentagon reviewed a number of alternatives in this study, with some contemplating reductions as low as 300 warheads,[200] but the Administration concluded that the United States could reduce U.S. deployed strategic forces by about one-third, to a level of 1,000-1,100 warheads, if it did so along with Russia. The United States would not proceed with unilateral cuts in the U.S. arsenal.[201]

The Trump Administration did not directly address questions about the size of the U.S. nuclear arsenal in the 2018 Nuclear Posture Review. It indicated that it would continue to support the implementation of New START, at least through 2021, and that it would continue to pursue the nuclear modernization programs that began during the Obama Administration. It stated that, as a part of this modernization program, the United States would deploy a minimum of 12 Columbia class submarines and 400 missiles within 450 launch facilities under the GBSD program.[202] It did not, however, offer recommendations on the numbers of warheads that would be deployed on these missiles or indicate whether the United States would remain within the limits established by New START after the treaty expired.

In 2018, Rear Admiral John Tammen, the Navy's director for submarine warfare, said that the Navy would keep the production line for Columbia class submarines open, after completing the 12 submarines, to maintain the option of increasing the size of the fleet.[203] Moreover, the Navy's 30-year shipbuilding plan included a line for 5 additional heavy missile submarines, after the completion of the Columbia class program, that might serve as replacements for the Ohio-class cruise missile submarines.

Also in 2018, General John Hyten, then the Commander of U.S. Strategic Command, noted that the size and structure of the U.S. nuclear force is determined by the threats faced by the United States. He noted that, if the United States wanted to reduce the size of the force and curtail spending on nuclear modernization, it would have to reduce the threat, possibly by "renegotiating arms control treaties to further reduce the nuclear arsenals of the United States and Russia."[204]

In its Interim National Security Strategic Guidance, released in March 2021, the Biden Administration indicated that the United States would "take steps to reduce the role of nuclear weapons in our national security strategy," but did not offer any guidance on the possible size of the U.S. force.[205] Reports indicate that the Administration will begin its nuclear posture review in

---

[200] R. Jeffrey Smith, "Obama Embraces Big Nuke Cuts," *Foreign Policy*, February 8, 2013.

[201] Department of Defense, *Report on Nuclear Employment Strategy of the United States*, Washington, DC, June 12, 2013, p. 6, https://apps.dtic.mil/dtic/tr/fulltext/u2/a590745.pdf.

[202] Department of Defense, *Nuclear Posture Review*, Washington, DC, February 2, 2018, pp. 49-50, https://media.defense.gov/2018/Feb/02/2001872886/-1/-1/1/2018-NUCLEAR-POSTURE-REVIEW-FINAL-REPORT.PDF.

[203] Richard R. Burgess, "Navy Submarine Warfare Director: Navy to Keep Columbia SSBN Line 'Hot' After 12th Boat," *Seapower*, November 8, 2018. http://seapowermagazine.org/stories/20181108-Columbia.html?platform=hootsuite.

[204] Valerie Insinna, "STRATCOM head on key lawmaker's arms control agenda: 'If you want to save money, change the threat'," *Defense News*, November 15, 2018. https://www.defensenews.com/space/2018/11/15/stratcom-head-on-key-lawmakers-arms-control-agenda-if-you-want-to-save-money-change-the-threat/.

[205] The White House, *Interim National Security Strategic Guidance*, Washington, DC, March 2021, p. 13, https://www.whitehouse.gov/wp-content/uploads/2021/03/NSC-1v2.pdf.

mid-July 2021, with the results expected in early 2022.[206] This review will likely reassess the necessary size and structure of the U.S. nuclear arsenal.

Over the years, analysts have questioned why the United States must maintain a large force of nuclear weapons. They have questioned whether the United States would attack with such a large number of weapons if its own national survival were not at risk, and they note that only Russia currently has the capability to threaten U.S. national survival. They assert that the United States could likely meet any other potential contingency with a far smaller force of nuclear weapons. Some have concluded, instead, that the United States could maintain its security with a force of between 500 and 1,000 warheads.[207] Others, however, dispute this view and note that the United States has other potential adversaries, and, even if these nations do not possess thousands of nuclear warheads, some may expand their nuclear forces or chemical and biological capabilities in the future. Some have argued that the United States also needs to assure its allies of its commitment to their security, and this goal could require a force of significant size, regardless of the number of potential targets an adversary nation might possess. They also argue that a "minimum deterrent" of only a few hundred warheads would require a strategy of targeting an adversary's cities and population centers, rather than military capabilities. They note that this strategy has been rejected by both Republican and Democratic Administrations throughout the nuclear age.[208]

In recent years, concerns over the expansion of China's nuclear capabilities have animated the debate over the number of U.S. deployed nuclear weapons. According to the Pentagon's Annual Report on China's Military Power, China currently deploys around 200 nuclear warheads.[209] But U.S. officials have indicated that China is likely to expand its nuclear arsenal over the next 10 years, with some estimating that China might double or triple its number of deployed warheads.[210] In addition, recent open source analysis has shown that China may be constructing more than 100 new launch silos for its land-based missile force,[211] leading to a growing debate about whether and how the United States should alter its nuclear force in response. Some have argued that the United States should be prepared to expand its numbers of deployed nuclear warheads to meet the growing threats from Russia and China.[212] Others, however, argue that the existing U.S. force is more than adequate to deter Russia and China, because, even if China were

[206] Quint Forgey and Paul McLeary, "New nuclear review kicks off next week," *Politico*, July 7, 2021.

[207] See, for example, Sidney D. Drell and James E. Goodby. What Are Nuclear Weapons For? Recommendations for Restructuring U.S. Strategic Nuclear Forces. Arms Control Association, Updated October 2007.

[208] Dr. Keith B. Payne, *Why Do US Nuclear Force Numbers Matter for Deterrence?*, National Insititue for Public Policy, Information Series, Washington, DC, March 9, 2016, http://www.nipp.org/wp-content/uploads/2016/03/IS-404.pdf.

[209] U.S. Department of Defense, *Military and Security Developments of the People's Republic of China, 2020*, Annual Report to Congress, Washington, DC, September 2020, p. 55, https://media.defense.gov/2020/Sep/01/2002488689/-1/-1/1/2020-DOD-CHINA-MILITARY-POWER-REPORT-FINAL.PDF.

[210] Hudson Institute, *Transcript: The Arms Control Landscape featuring. DIA Lt. Gen. Robert P. Ashley, Jr.*, Transcript, Washington, DC, May 29, 2019, https://s3.amazonaws.com/media.hudson.org/Hudson%20Transcript%20-%20The%20Arms%20Control%20Landscape.pdf. See, also, Patrick Tucker, "US Nuclear Fears Are Shifting From a Clear Russian Threat to a Murkier Chinese One," *Defense One*, April 20, 2021, https://www.defenseone.com/threats/2021/04/us-nuclear-fears-are-shifting-clear-russian-threat-murkier-chinese-one/173501/.

[211] Joby Warrick, "China is building more than 100 new missile silos in its western desert, analysts say," *Washington Post*, June 30, 2021, https://www.washingtonpost.com/national-security/china-nuclear-missile-silos/2021/06/30/0fa8debc-d9c2-11eb-bb9e-70fda8c37057_story.html.

[212] Matthew Kroenig, "China's Nuclear Silos and the Arms-Control Fantasy," *Wall Street Journal*, July 7, 2021, https://www.wsj.com/articles/chinas-nuclear-silos-and-the-arms-control-fantasy-11625696243.

to double or triple the size of its force, the resulting 600-900 warheads would still fall far short of the U.S. force of more than 1,500 deployed strategic warheads.[213]

Force Structure

Debate About the Need for a Triad

When the Bush Administration announced the results of the 2001 Nuclear Posture Review, it indicated that the United States would retain a triad of ICBMs, SLBMs, and heavy bombers for the foreseeable future. The Obama Administration also offered continuing support for the retention of the strategic triad. Robert Scher, then the Assistant Secretary of Defense for Strategy, Plans, and Capabilities, reiterated the Obama Administration's support for the nuclear triad in testimony before Congress. He argued that the United States needed to "maintain a deterrent that is inherently robust and stable," even though the United States did not need "to mirror every potential adversary, system-for-system or yield-for-yield." He indicated that the Obama Administration believed that the triad continued to "provide the credibility, flexibility, and survivability to meet and adapt to the challenges of a dynamic 21st century security environment."[214]

The 2018 Nuclear Posture Review offers a similar justification for retaining the nuclear triad. It notes that "the triad's synergy and overlapping attributes help ensure the enduring survivability of our deterrence capabilities against attack and our capacity to hold a range of adversary targets at risk throughout a crisis or conflict. Eliminating any leg of the triad would greatly ease adversary attack planning and allow an adversary to concentrate resources and attention on defeating the remaining two legs." It also lists additional capabilities and attributes that it views as essential to meeting U.S. deterrence needs, and argues that "the multiplicity of platforms, weapons, and modes of operation inherent in the triad and U.S. non-strategic nuclear forces, provide a significant margin of flexibility and resilience."[215]

While the Biden Administration has not yet conducted its Nuclear Posture Review, and, therefore, has not yet offered a justification for retaining the triad, current Pentagon officials have expressed their support. For example, during their confirmation hearings, Secretary of Defense Lloyd Austin and Deputy Secretary of Defense Kathleen Hicks both noted that nuclear deterrence serves as "the cornerstone of American national security" and that "the triad has been … the bedrock of our nuclear deterrent."[216] Each endorsed, in general, the modernization programs for the triad, but neither could commit specifically to each element because, as both noted, they had not yet been briefed on the details of those programs.[217]

---

[213] Fred Kaplan, "Let's Not Get Into a Nuclear Arms Race With China," *Slate*, July 13, 2021, https://slate.com/news-and-politics/2021/07/nuclear-weapons-china-missiles-yumen.html.

[214] U.S. Congress, Senate Committee on Armed Services, Subcommittee on Strategic Forces, *Nuclear Acquisition Programs and the Nuclear Doctrine*, Hearing, 114th Cong., 2nd sess., February 9, 2016.

[215] Department of Defense, *Nuclear Posture Review*, Washington, DC, February 2, 2018, p. 43, https://media.defense.gov/2018/Feb/02/2001872886/-1/-1/1/2018-NUCLEAR-POSTURE-REVIEW-FINAL-REPORT.PDF.

[216] U.S. Congress, Senate Armed Services Committee, *Nomination of Kathleen Hicks to be Deputy Defense Secretary*, Hearing, 117th Cong., 1st sess., February 2, 2021.

[217] U.S. Congress, Senate Committee on Armed Services, *Nomination of Lloyd Austin to be Defense Secretary*, Hearing, 117th Cong., 1st sess., January 19, 2021.

Debate About Specific Legs of the Triad

Some analysts outside government, have questioned whether the United States could retain a robust deterrent without one of the current types of strategic delivery vehicles.[218] Some, including former Secretary of Defense William Perry, have argued that the United States should eliminate its ICBM force and rely on bombers and submarine-based missiles to deter nuclear attacks. Secretary Perry has argued that "we don't need land-based missiles to deter a nuclear attack. Quite the opposite: they make a nuclear war more likely due to a mistake by an unstable president, miscalculation or false alarm. They make us less safe."[219] Advocates of the elimination of ICBMs note that, because ICBMs are vulnerable to destruction in an attack by another nation, a President, if informed of such an attack, would feel pressure to launch the ICBMs promptly, before the ICBMs were destroyed on the ground. If, however, as happened several times during the Cold War, the United States received a false warning of attack, the time pressure might lead a President to launch a first strike and start a nuclear war when the United States was not under attack. Those who support the elimination of ICBMs conclude that the United States can deter a nuclear attack by threatening retaliation with its survivable submarine-based missiles and without relying on vulnerable and dangerous land-based missiles.[220]

Those who support the continued U.S. deployment of ICBMs in general dispute both the analysis and the conclusions described above.[221] They deny that a President would be pressured to launch ICBMs promptly when faced with a false alarm and note that U.S. early warning systems have evolved since the Cold War in ways that reduce the risk of false warning. They also raise concerns about the future survivability of ballistic missile submarines—particularly if technological developments render them vulnerable—and note that the United States deterrent force may lack enough warheads to achieve U.S. retaliatory objectives without the warheads on ICBMs. This is because nearly all ICBMs are on alert and available for a retaliatory attack all the time, while only a portion of the submarine force may be at sea and available.

Those who support the continued deployment of U.S. ICBMs also argue that these missiles strengthen, rather than undermine deterrence, because they complicate an adversary's ability to launch an effective first strike against the United States. Specifically, they note that ICBMs raise the barriers to entry for nations that might challenge the United States. An ICBM force deployed in 400 launch silos across the northern tier would require an attack of more than 800 warheads (assuming two warheads assigned to each launcher) to disable or destroy the force. Russia is the only nation with enough nuclear warheads to contemplate such an attack, and analysts argue that it would be deterred by the promise of U.S. retaliation to such a large attack from submarines based at sea. Without the ICBMs as targets, this argument posits, a nation with far fewer warheads might contemplate an attack on a much smaller number of U.S. command and control and leadership targets on the hope of deterring a U.S. response to this much smaller attack. As General John Hyten, the Vice Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, has noted, the ICBM force is

[218] Mark Thompson, "Nuclear Triad Warfare," *Time Magazine*, October 18, 2011.

[219] William J. Perry and Tom Z. Collina, "$264B for ICBMs That Would Be Destroyed in the Ground? No, Thanks," *Defense One*, April 21, 2021, https://www.defenseone.com/ideas/2021/04/264b-icbms-would-be-destroyed-ground-no-thanks/173498/.

[220] William Hartung, "The nuclear triad is not sacred," *Defense News*, February 2, 2021, https://www.defensenews.com/opinion/commentary/2021/02/02/the-nuclear-triad-is-not-sacred/.

[221] David M. Deptula, "Five Persistent Misconceptions About Modernizing The U.S. ICBM Force," Forbes, December, 22, 2020, https://www.forbes.com/sites/davedeptula/2020/12/22/five-persistent-misconceptions-about-modernizing-the-us-icbm-force/?sh=3edd1a0a3ba7. See, also, Matthew R. Costlow, "No ICBMs? Big Problems," *Defense One*, April 27, 2021, https://www.defenseone.com/ideas/2021/04/no-icbms-big-problems/173643/.

"the most difficult to fully target because in order to target 400 silos across five states in the middle of America an adversary has to commit hundreds, if not thousands, of nuclear weapons in order to try to take that leg out." He went on to state that, without the ICBM force, an adversary could contemplate attacking critical U.S. nuclear and command and control targets with "20 strategic weapons that could be nuclear and non-nuclear." He asserted that, "if you go to that kind of number, all of a sudden China becomes a peer adversary ... and overall deterrence, especially with China, is really challenged."[222]

Those who support reductions in or the elimination of ICBMs dispute the conclusion that their absence would embolden U.S. adversaries and exacerbate the threat of nuclear attack for the United States. They note that, even without nuclear warheads based on ICBMs, the United States would maintain the ability to retaliate following a strike against U.S. territory with nuclear warheads deployed on ballistic missile submarines. And they argue that all nations, Russia and China included, would know that any strategic attack against the United States, even with relatively small numbers of nuclear or nonnuclear weapons, would be met by such a retaliatory strike.[223]

Some analysts have also argued that the United States could reduce the size of its SLBM fleet and retain only 8 or 10 submarines. They argued that this reduction now, and the future acquisition of fewer replacement submarines, could save the Navy $6 billion-$7 billion over the next 10 years.[224] They also noted that this change need not reduce the number of operational warheads on SLBMs, because the United States could deploy each submarine with 24 missiles, rather than the 20 planned under New START, and could increase the number of warheads on each missile. However, with so few submarines, the United States might have to eliminate one of its submarine bases, leaving it with submarines based only in the Atlantic or only in the Pacific Ocean. Or the United States might have to reduce the number of submarines on station, and, therefore, the number of warheads available to the President promptly, at the start of a conflict. These changes may not be consistent with current submarine operations and employment plans.

Analysts outside government have also questioned plans to replace the air-launched cruise missile (ALCM) with the new long-range strike missile (LRSO) in the 2020s. Some argue that this missile will be redundant, as the Air Force is already planning to deploy a new penetrating bomber. They note that, during the 1980s, the United States deployed cruise missiles both to extend the service life of the B-52 bombers, which could no longer penetrate Soviet air defenses, and to provide a means to attack and destroy those air defenses prior to follow-on attacks with penetrating bombers.[225] But, according to the program's critics, if the Air Force deploys 100 new bombers that can penetrate advanced air defenses, it will not need cruise missiles to destroy those defenses. Moreover, even if the United States does plan to attack an adversary's air defenses, it

[222] Patrick Tucker, "Hyten: US Must Broaden Its Strategic Deterrence Concept—and Keep Its ICBMs," *Defense One*, February 26, 2021, https://www.defenseone.com/technology/2021/02/hyten-us-must-broaden-its-strategic-deterrence-concept-and-keep-its-icbms/172320/.

[223] Garrett Hinck and Pranay Vaddi, "Setting a Course Away from the Intercontinental Ballistic Missile," *War on The Rocks*, February 16, 2021, https://warontherocks.com/2021/02/setting-a-course-away-from-the-intercontinental-ballistic-missile/.

[224] Daryl G. Kimball, "Defuse the Exploding Costs of Nuclear Weapons," *Arms Control Today*, December 2012, p. 4.

[225] William J. Perry and Andy Weber, "Mr. President, kill the new cruise missile," *Washington Post*, October 15, 2015. See, also, Tom Nichols, "The 1980s Called. "They Don't Need Their Cruise Missile Back." *The National Interest*, November, 3, 2015.

could do so with existing conventional cruise missiles, such as the extended range version of the Joint Air-to-Surface Standoff Missile (JASSM) missile.[226]

The Air Force has disputed the assertion that the bomber and cruise missile capabilities are redundant. Air Force officials have noted that the two systems are complementary, with each providing different capabilities for the United States and different profiles that would complicate an adversary's attempts to defend against a U.S. attack.[227] Some analysts also note that advanced air defense systems have proliferated among potential U.S. adversaries, and that these capabilities "make it harder for our forces to reach their targets." Deploying both penetrating bombers and long-range cruise missiles, therefore, will strengthen the U.S. nuclear deterrent.[228]

Debate About Low-Yield Weapons

In addition to debating the value of each of the legs of the nuclear triad, some analysts have addressed questions about whether the United States should develop and deploy new types of nuclear weapons in response to the challenges posed by emerging nuclear adversaries. Attention has focused, in particular, on lower-yield weapons. Some argue that these weapons would strengthen deterrence by giving the United States more limited, tailored, and, therefore, credible options for nuclear use than are currently available with higher-yield weapons.[229] Others, however, argue that the deployment of low-yield nuclear weapons could undermine deterrence and make nuclear war more likely, because they might be seen as a more "usable" nuclear weapons.

Press reports indicate that a Defense Science Board study completed in December 2016 called for the Pentagon to consider the deployment of lower-yield nuclear weapons and the development of options for the limited use of nuclear weapons.[230] In early February 2017, General David Goldfein, the Chief of Staff of the Air Force, indicated that he also thought the nuclear posture review should consider the development of lower-yield warheads, as a part of a new look at "what constitutes deterrence in the 21st century."[231]

The Trump Administration addressed this issue during its Nuclear Posture Review and concluded that "in the near-term, the United States will modify a small number of existing SLBM warheads to provide a low-yield option." This is the W76-2 warhead described above, which is now deployed on a small number of Trident II D-5 missiles. The NPR noted that the United States has long maintained cruise missile warheads and B61 bombs that provide a low-yield option, but argued that a low-yield SLBM warhead will "ensure a prompt response option that is able to penetrate adversary defenses."[232] The NPR asserted that this "supplement" to the U.S. nuclear

[226] Hans Kristensen, "LRSO—The Nuclear Cruise Missile Mission," *Strategic Security Blog, Federation of American Scientists,* October 20, 2015. http://fas.org/blogs/security/2015/10/lrso-mission/.

[227] Bryan Bender, "Air Force Questions Call to Cancel new Nuclear-Armed Cruise Missile," *Politico,* October 25, 2015.

[228] Mel Deaile and Al Mauroni, "Why We Still Need a Nuclear-Armed Cruise Missile," *War on the Rocks,* October 26, 2015. http://warontherocks.com/2015/10/why-we-still-need-a-nuclear-armed-cruise-missile/.

[229] Clark Murdock et al., "Project Atom: A Competitive Strategies Approach to Defining U.S. Nuclear Strategy and Posture for 2025-2050," CSIS, May 2015, https://csis-prod.s3.amazonaws.com/s3fs-public/legacy_files/files/publication/150716_Murdock_ProjectAtom_Web_Rev2.pdf.

[230] John M. Donnelly, "Pentagon Panel Urges Trump Team to Expand Nuclear Options," *CQ Roll Call,* February 2, 2017.

[231] John M. Donnelly, "Top Air Force General Open to Changes in Nuclear Arms," *CQ Roll Call,* February 7, 2017.

[232] Department of Defense, *Nuclear Posture Review,* Washington, DC, February 2, 2018, pp. 54-55, https://media.defense.gov/2018/Feb/02/2001872886/-1/-1/1/2018-NUCLEAR-POSTURE-REVIEW-FINAL-

force posture would enhance deterrence by "denying potential adversaries any mistaken confidence that limited nuclear employment can provide a useful advantage over the United States and its allies."

The NPR's rationale for a new low-yield SLBM warhead differs, in some respects, from the debate evident in the literature over the past few years. Where the previous debate focused on the possible need for a low-yield warhead in regional scenarios, the NPR specifically points to Russia's nuclear doctrine and Russia's purported "escalate to de-escalate strategy" as the justification for this warhead. The NPR argues that Russia "mistakenly assesses that the threat of nuclear escalation or actual first use of nuclear weapons would serve to 'de-escalate' a conflict on terms favorable to Russia."[233] The NPR, therefore, "concluded that a new capability was required to ensure the Russian leadership does not miscalculate regarding the consequences of limited nuclear first use.... Russia must instead understand that nuclear first use, however limited, will fail to achieve its objectives, fundamentally alter the nature of a conflict, and trigger incalculable and intolerable costs for Moscow." According to one analyst, by modifying a small number of W-76 warheads, the United States will "strengthen Russian perceptions of U.S. credibility and will."[234]

Analysts outside government have raised a number of concerns about the deployment of a low-yield version of the W76 warhead.[235] Some have argued that, because the United States already has warheads with low-yield options on cruise missiles and B61 bombs, it already has the flexibility and means to deter Russia's escalation to low-yield nuclear weapons during a conventional conflict. Others argue that the new warhead will add little to the U.S. deterrent capability because Russia would be unable to determine the yield of an attacking warhead until it had detonated. Moreover, if Russia could not determine the yield of the warhead, and chose to retaliate before assessing the yield, the U.S. use of a low-yield warhead could lead Russia to escalate to a much broader and more destructive nuclear conflict.

Those who support the W76-2 warhead have responded to these concerns by noting that Russia is not likely to escalate to full-scale nuclear war before confirming the nature of the U.S. attack. In addition, some have pointed out that because the U.S. goal is to deter Russian nuclear use in the first place, concerns about how the war might unfold if deterrence failed are highly speculative. They believe that a U.S. low-yield warhead would raise the nuclear threshold because the United States would be more likely to respond to Russia's use of low-yield nuclear weapons if it had a low-yield option of its own. Because Russia would know that the United States had this option, Russia would be less likely to escalate to nuclear use during a conventional conflict.

The Cost of Nuclear Weapons

When the Obama Administration submitted the 1251 report to the Senate during the New START ratification process, it indicated that it expected to spend around $210 billion over 10 years (2011-2021) to maintain and modernize the U.S. nuclear arsenal. This total covered mostly research and development funding, but not the costs of producing and procuring the next generation of submarines, bombers, and missiles, as these activities would occur after the timeframe contained in the report. Moreover, it became evident, as Congress reviewed the Administration's plans to

REPORT.PDF.

[233] Ibid., p. 8.

[234] Frank Miller, "Addressing Fears About the Nuclear Posture Review and Limited Nuclear Use," *War on the Rocks*, February 28, 2018, https://warontherocks.com/2018/02/addressing-fears-nuclear-posture-review-limited-nuclear-use/?utm_content=buffer7699f&utm_medium=social&utm_source=twitter.com&utm_campaign=buffer.

[235] For a summary of the issues raised during the debate on low-yield SLBM warheads, see CRS In Focus IF11143, *A Low-Yield, Submarine-Launched Nuclear Warhead: Overview of the Expert Debate*, by Amy F. Woolf.

modernize the nuclear enterprise, that it was difficult to determine how much the United States spent each year on nuclear weapons. The funding was divided between the Department of Defense and the Department of Energy, and, in many cases, was combined with funding for other, nonnuclear activities. In other words, the United States does not maintain a single, unified budget for nuclear weapons and other nuclear activities.

Consequently, in 2012, Congress directed the Congressional Budget Office (CBO) to estimate the costs of U.S. plans for operating, maintaining, and modernizing nuclear weapons, the delivery systems, and the DOE nuclear weapons complex over the next 10 years. CBO issued its report in late 2013.[236] It found that the United States was likely to spend $355 billion over the next 10 years on its nuclear weapons enterprise. This total included $56 billion for command, control, communications, and early warning activities and $59 billion for additional costs based on historical cost growth of similar programs. Neither of these categories had been included in the Administration's estimate in 2010. When CBO considered the same categories as the Administration, it estimated 10-year spending of $241 billion, a number close to the estimate provided by the Administration.

CBO updated its estimate in January 2015, and reported that it calculated that the United States would spend $348 billion between 2015 and 2024; excluding command and control and cost growth, the total that was comparable to the Administration's 2010 estimate of $247 billion. CBO updated its report again in February 2017, estimating that the United States would spend $400 billion on nuclear weapons between 2017 and 2026. In its 2019 update, CBO estimated that the United States would spend $494 billion on nuclear weapons between 2019 and 2028; the 2021 update estimates that the United States will spend $634 billion between 2021 and 2030.[237] The growth in the 10-year estimates derives from the fact that the programs are now moving from the research and development phase into procurement.

Congress also mandated that the DOD and DOE provide 10-year cost estimates of the expected costs of nuclear weapons programs, and that GAO evaluate the cost estimates. In July 2017, GAO released its review of the DOD and DOE combined report for FY2017. The combined report estimates that the costs of sustaining and modernizing nuclear delivery systems, the nuclear command and control system, the nuclear stockpile, and the nuclear security enterprise will total $342 billion between FY2017 and FY2026.

Both the CBO studies and the DOD/DOE reports indicated that the United States was on track to spend, on average, $35-$40 billion per year as it sustains and modernizes its nuclear weapons programs. This indicates that the United States could spend at least $1-$1.2 trillion on nuclear weapons programs and modernization over the next 30 years.[238] This estimate is consistent with others that have been presented by organizations outside government. For example, in January 2014, analysts at the James Martin Center for Nonproliferation Studies estimated that the United States might spend $1 trillion, or an average of just over $30 billion per year, over the next 30

[236] Congressional Budget Office, *Projected Costs of U.S. Nuclear Forces, 2014-2023*, Washington, DC, December 2013, http://www.cbo.gov/sites/default/files/cbofiles/attachments/12-19-2013-NuclearForces.pdf.

[237] Congressional Budget Office, *Projected Costs of U.S. Nuclear Forces, 2019-2028*, Washington, DC, January 2019, p. 3, https://www.cbo.gov/system/files/2019-01/54914-NuclearForces.pdf. See, also, Congressional Budget Office, Projected Costs of U.S. Nuclear Forces, 2021-2030. Washington D.C., May 2021, p. 3., https://www.cbo.gov/system/files/2021-05/57130-Nuclear-Forces.pdf.

[238] Congressional Budget Office, *Approaches for Managing the Costs of U.S. Nuclear Forces, 2017-2046*, Washington, DC, October 2017, p. 15, https://www.cbo.gov/system/files/115th-congress-2017-2018/reports/53211-nuclearforces.pdf.

years, to modernize its nuclear enterprise.[239] In addition, in a briefing prepared in May 2013, the Air Force estimated that the investments in nuclear modernization programs would peak in between 2025 and 2035, at approximately $30 billion per year.[240]

While there appears to be a broad base of agreement about the magnitude of the costs that the United States is likely to incur as it modernizes its nuclear arsenal, there has been less agreement about whether the United States can, or should, proceed with all of these programs. Many analysts have noted that, with the passage of the Budget Control Act in 2011, the amount of funding available for defense spending was $1 trillion lower than expected when the Obama Administration first outlined the nuclear modernization program. Consequently, rising costs for nuclear weapons programs could cut into funding for other Pentagon priorities.

While Congress repeatedly raised the caps in the Budget Control Act, increasing spending on defense programs and reducing the pressure on the modernization programs, the problem may not disappear after the Budget Control Act expires in 2021. Representative Adam Smith, who chairs the House Armed Services Committee, has questioned the costs and direction of the U.S. nuclear modernization programs. He has noted that "we need to take a responsible approach to the nuclear weapons enterprise, and recognize that the current $1.5 trillion plan to build new nuclear weapons and upgrade our nuclear weapons complex is unrealistic and unaffordable."[241]

Others, however, argue that the United States not only can afford to bear the costs of these systems, but cannot afford the costs of failing to modernize its nuclear arsenal. Admiral Cecil Haney, then the Commander of Strategic Command, made this point in a hearing before the House Armed Services Committee in 2015, when he said that "achieving strategic deterrence in the 21st century requires continued investment in strategic capabilities and renewed multigenerational commitment of intellectual capital." He noted that, as the modernization programs progressed, spending on nuclear weapons was likely to rise from around 2.5%-3% of DOD's budget to around 5%-6% of that budget in the late 2020s to 2030s. When asked whether the United States could afford to make this investment, he noted that other nations have been modernizing their forces and continued to pose an "existential threat" to the United States. He noted that "in order to maintain and sustain its strategic stability, it's very important that we have that kind of balance" with these nations.[242]

The 2018 Nuclear Posture Review offered a similar response to concerns about the cost of the nuclear modernization programs. It noted that DOD currently spends 2%-3% of its budget to maintain and operate the nuclear force; this will rise to about 6.4% of its budget at the "highpoint" of the modernization program.[243] This total did not include the costs associated with NNSA's life extension programs or the recommended investment in recapitalization of NNSA's

[239] Jon B. Wolfsthal, Jeffrey Lewis, and Marc Quint, *The Trillion Dollar Nuclear Triad*, James Martin Center for Nonproliferation Studies, Monterey, CA, January 2014, http://www.nonproliferation.org/wp-content/uploads/2016/04/140107_trillion_dollar_nuclear_triad.pdf.

[240] For a copy of General Kowalski's briefing slides, see http://www.fas.org/programs/ssp/nukes/nuclearweapons/AFGSC-CommandBrief-May2013.pdf.

[241] Rachel Cohen, "Nuclear modernization programs could face renewed scrutiny in Democrat-controlled House," *Inside Defense*, November 7, 2018. https://insidedefense.com/inside-air-force/nuke-programs-could-face-renewed-scrutiny-democrat-controlled-house.

[242] U.S. Congress, House Committee on Armed Services, Subcommittee on Strategic Forces, *President Obama's Fiscal 2016 Budget Request on Strategic Forces*, Hearing, 114th Cong., 1st sess., February 26, 2015.

[243] Department of Defense, *Nuclear Posture Review*, Washington, DC, February 2, 2018, p. 51, https://media.defense.gov/2018/Feb/02/2001872886/-1/-1/1/2018-NUCLEAR-POSTURE-REVIEW-FINAL-REPORT.PDF.

infrastructure. Moreover, although Congress raised the caps in the Budget Control Act to allow for additional spending on defense, the analysis in the NPR did not address questions about whether the nuclear modernization will compete with other DOD priorities for scarce funding.

Finally, some have questioned whether nuclear weapons spending will exceed the 2018 NPR's estimate of 6.4% of the defense budget, as annual budgets for nuclear spending at DOD and NNSA continue to rise, while defense budgets remain flat or decline. For example, some analysts have noted that the Covid-19 pandemic could eventually lead to reductions in defense spending as the United States sharply increases funding to support the broader economy, or reductions in procurement spending as the Pentagon seeks to bolster funding for personnel and readiness programs. Consequently, questions about the need for trade-offs in an environment of limited resources could again fuel debates about the scope of the nuclear modernization programs.[244]

Author Information

Amy F. Woolf
Specialist in Nuclear Weapons Policy

Disclaimer

This document was prepared by the Congressional Research Service (CRS). CRS serves as nonpartisan shared staff to congressional committees and Members of Congress. It operates solely at the behest of and under the direction of Congress. Information in a CRS Report should not be relied upon for purposes other than public understanding of information that has been provided by CRS to Members of Congress in connection with CRS's institutional role. CRS Reports, as a work of the United States Government, are not subject to copyright protection in the United States. Any CRS Report may be reproduced and distributed in its entirety without permission from CRS. However, as a CRS Report may include copyrighted images or material from a third party, you may need to obtain the permission of the copyright holder if you wish to copy or otherwise use copyrighted material.

[244] Joe Gould, "Storm clouds await Pentagon's request for defense industry cash injection," *Defense News*, April 27, 2020, https://www.defensenews.com/congress/2020/04/27/storm-clouds-await-pentagons-request-for-defense-industry-cash/#.XqcSJq0NxBM.twitter.