The United States: Stockpile Stewardship or Nuclear Terrorism?

By Yuram Abdullah Weiler
2015-03-17

"*NNSA has, for the sixth consecutive year, increased the budget request for Weapons Activities. ... Much of this 11.2 percent increase will be devoted to stockpile life extension programs and recapitalization of critical plutonium and uranium capabilities.*"
—U.S. Department of Energy National Nuclear Security Administration[1]

The United States maintains a huge stockpile of nuclear weapons, despite having made a commitment "to pursue negotiations in good faith" towards "general and complete disarmament" almost half a century ago.[2] With 1642 nuclear warheads deployed on inter-continental ballistic missiles (ICBM), submarine-launched ballistic missiles (SLBM) and strategic bombers,[3] the U.S. stands in clear contradiction to the long-term intent of the nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty (NPT). Yet despite its obvious obduracy, the U.S. audaciously accuses Iran of being a threat, although the country neither possesses nuclear weapons, nor has a nuclear weapons program.

Called "stockpile stewardship," responsibility for maintaining the vast U.S. nuclear arsenal falls upon the U.S. Department of Energy's National Nuclear Security Administration (NNSA), a complex of eight nuclear weapons sites and some 30,000 personnel[4] "responsible for enhancing national security through the military application of nuclear science."[5] Tasked to ensure the U.S. "sustains a safe, secure, and effective nuclear deterrent through the application of science, technology, engineering, and manufacturing," the NNSA insists that "no new nuclear weapons designs have been introduced since 1991."[6] But in apparent contradiction, it "ensures the United States maintains excellence in nuclear science and technology that is second to none."[7] In other words, the NNSA mission is to maintain the U.S. role as the world's leading nuclear terrorist.

Nearly $9 billion of the NNSA's $12.5 billion budget will go "weapons activities," which is the research, development, testing and evaluation of the nuclear weapons stockpile and the manufacture of nuclear weapon components. Included in this program is $1.3 billion for life extension programs (LEP) and major alterations,[8] which is part of a 30-year, $1 trillion U.S. nuclear weapons modernization effort of its so-called "nuclear triad" of aging ICBMs, SLBMs, and B-2 and B-52H bombers. Out of that estimated trillion dollars, $355 billion, which is more than the total annual cost of operation, support and related activities for the nuclear triad itself, would be allocated to NNSA weapons activities.[9]

Specifically, the U.S. nuclear triad consists of the following submarines, bombers and missiles:
- fourteen Ohio-class SSBNs (ship, submersible, ballistic missile, nuclear), each with twenty-four launch tubes for a Trident II D5 SLBM, which carries aW76 or W88 nuclear warhead, based at Bangor, Washington, and Kings Bay, Georgia.
-ninety-four nuclear-capable strategic bombers: seventy-six B-52Hs deployed at Barksdale AFB (air force base), Louisiana, and Minot AFB, North Dakota; and eighteen B-2As deployed at Whiteman AFB, Missouri.
- 450 deployed Minuteman III ICBMs, 35 each deployed in silos in three 150-missile wings at F.E. Warren AFB, Wyoming, Minot AFB, North Dakota, and Malmstrom AFB, Montana.[10]

Each "leg" of the U.S. nuclear triad is scheduled to be upgraded or replaced under the modernization program. By the year 2022, the annual cost of this program is expected to reach $20.8 billion, more than double current outlays.

To replace the Ohio-class SSBNs, a new, nuclear-powered ballistic missile launching submarine called the Sea-Based Strategic Deterrent (SBSD) or SSBN(X) would be designed together with a replacement for the Trident II missiles, which are themselves undergoing an NNSA life extension program. The current W76 and W88 warheads used on these missiles would undergo updating to replace arming, fusing and firing mechanisms. New warheads, designated as interoperable warheads IW-1 and IW-2, would be developed as part of another LEP for use on either SLBMs or ICBMs. The estimated cost of this program from 2014 to 2023 is $82 billion.

To replace the Minuteman III ICBM, which was first deployed in 1970, a new missile known as the Ground-Based Strategic Deterrent (GBSD) would be developed while the Minuteman III would undergo LEP to extend serviceability to beyond 2030. The IW-1 and IW-2 interoperable nuclear warheads would replace the existing W78 and W87 currently deployed. The estimated cost of this program from 2014 to 2023 is $24 billion.

To replace the 1960s-era B-52H and aging B-2 heavy bomber fleet, a new bomber, designated the Long Range Strike Bomber (LRS-B) would be developed along with a replacement, called the Long-Range Standoff weapon (LRS-O), for the air-launched cruise missile (ALCM). Additionally, the B61 nuclear bombs carried by these bombers will undergo LEP, a new warhead would be selected for the LSR-O, and a capability upgrade to carry cruise missiles would be added to the B-2. The estimated cost of this program from 2014 to 2023 is $40 billion.[11]

We might ask, what is the justification for this profligate spending on more weapons of mass destruction? Typically, U.S. politicians insist that the buildup is simply a reaction to a technological arms race initiated by other powers. Quoting members of the New START Treaty negotiation team, U.S. Representative Michael Turner (R-OH) stated, "Russia is modernizing every leg of its nuclear triad with new, more advanced systems." Likewise, "China is steadily increasing the numbers and capabilities of the ballistic missiles it deploys," and it is "actively working to develop a submarine-based nuclear deterrent force, something it has never had."[12]

In addition to the strategic systems of the nuclear triad, which are subject to limitations imposed by the Strategic Arms Reduction Treaty (New START), the U.S. fields several tactical (non-strategic) nuclear weapons based on the B61 bomb and deployed on F-15 and F-16 NATO-equipped aircraft. One such version is the B61-12, which is billed as a consolidation and LEP of B61-1, 3, 4 and10 versions, but actually the added tail kit transforms this into a smart tactical nuclear weapon. With reduced yield, and hence lower radioactive fallout, but increased accuracy, the B61-12 looks more like a new, first-strike tactical weapon with new capabilities than an LEP rebuild.[13]

The U.S. has 180 B61 nuclear bombs deployed variously at: Volkel AB in the Netherlands for use on Dutch F-16s, Kleine Brogel AB in Belgium for use on Belgian F-16s, Buchel AB in Germany for use on German Tornados, Ghedi Torre AB in Italy for use on Italian Tornados, Aviano AB in Italy for use on U.S. F-16s, and Incirlik AB in Turkey for use on U.S. and Turkish

F-16s.[14] That these five NATO allies of the U.S., all of whom are non-nuclear states, are allowing themselves to be pressured into being nuclear-armed American proxies underscores the hypocritical extremes to which the U.S. will resort in explicit contravention of Article 2 of the NPT while simultaneously demanding the strictest adherence to nonproliferation standards by others, such as Iran.[15]

For its part, the U.S. claims that such a relation does not violate the NPT since its WMD in these NATO allies remain under the control of the U.S. military. However, as Hans M. Kristensen, director of the Nuclear Information Project at the Federation of American Scientists pointed out, "Legal arguments aside: the nuclear sharing arrangement undercuts the non-proliferation norms NATO and the United States promote elsewhere."[16] Indeed, Washington's warmongers, rather than engaging in "stockpile stewardship" as they claim, are in reality promulgating worldwide nuclear terrorism.

While boasting of its "65-year record of nuclear non-use," the sole superpower insists that it has the right to use its horrific weapons of mass destruction even against non-nuclear states, should they violate their commitments under the NPT. Assurance that the U.S. "would only consider the use of nuclear weapons in extreme circumstances to defend the vital interests of the United States or its allies and partners"[17] gives scant comfort to non-nuclear state actors, like Iran, which are threatened continuously by the world's leading state sponsor of nuclear terror.

In spite of his own country's violations of NPT norms and blatant nuclear threats, U.S. senator Cory Gardner (R-CO) has accused Iran of "engaging in a variety of nuclear activities which violated its obligations as a signatory of the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty." Gardner, a rising right wing Republican star, a supporter of the Zionist regime, and a signatory to the recent infantile letter sent by U.S. senators to the Leaders of Iran, insists that "The American people, through their representatives in Congress, will reject any deal that does not completely eliminate the threat of a nuclear Iran."[18] Mr. Gardner should be made aware that many feel it is high time to completely eliminate the threat posed by a nuclear United States.

The U.S. Defense Department's 2010 Nuclear Posture Review warns that "unless today's dangerous trends are arrested and reversed, before very long we will be living in a world with a steadily growing number of nuclear-armed states and an increasing likelihood of terrorists getting their hands on nuclear weapons."[19] Yet the only acts of nuclear terrorism–the atomic bombing of Hiroshima and Nagasaki–were committed by the United States, which steadfastly refuses to relinquish its death grip on its "atomic energy deterrence devices."

Endnotes

[1] "Fiscal Year 2016 Stockpile Stewardship and Management Plan," *U.S. Department of Energy National Nuclear Security Administration*, March 2015, accessed March 16, 2015, http://nnsa.energy.gov/sites/default/files/FY16SSMP_FINAL%203_16_2015_reducedsize.pdf.

[2] "Treaty on the Non-Proliferation Of Nuclear Weapons (NPT)," *United Nations Office of Disarmament Affairs*, July 1, 1968, accessed March 16, 2015, http://www.un.org/disarmament/WMD/Nuclear/NPTtext.shtml.

[3] "New START Treaty Aggregate Numbers of Strategic Offensive Arms," *Bureau of Arms Control, Verification and Compliance*, U.S. Department of State, January 15, 2015, accessed March 16, 2015, http://www.state.gov/documents/organization/235818.pdf.

[4] "FY 2016 Congressional Budget Request," vol.1, *U.S. Department of Energy National Nuclear Security Administration*, February 2015, 61, accessed March 17, 2015, http://www.energy.gov/sites/prod/files/2015/02/f19/FY2016BudgetVolume1%20_1.pdf.
[5] "Our Mission," *U.S. Department of Energy National Nuclear Security Administration*, March 2015, accessed March 17, 2015, http://nnsa.energy.gov/ourmission.
[6] "Nuclear Weapons Life Cycle," *U.S. Department of Energy National Nuclear Security Administration*, March 2015, accessed March 17, 2015, http://nnsa.energy.gov/ourmission/managingthestockpile/nwlifecycle.
[7] "Our Mission," ibid.
[8] "FY 2016 Congressional Budget Request," ibid., 66.
[9] Jon B. Wolfsthal, Jeffrey Lewis, and Marc Quint, "The Trillion Dollar Nuclear Triad: U.S. Strategic Nuclear Modernization Over the Next Thirty Years," *James Martin Center for Nonproliferation Studies*, January 7, 2014, 11, accessed March 17, 2015, http://cns.miis.edu/opapers/pdfs/140107_trillion_dollar_nuclear_triad.pdf.
[10] Jon B. Wolfsthal et al, ibid., 14, 18, 21.
[11] "Projected Costs of U.S. Nuclear Forces, 2014 to 2023," *U.S. Congressional Budget Office*, December 2013, 8, 13, accessed March 17, 2015, http://www.cbo.gov/sites/default/files/cbofiles/attachments/12-19-2013-NuclearForces.pdf.
[12] "The Current Status and Future Direction for U.S. Nuclear Weapons Policy and Posture," *House Armed Services Committee, Subcommittee on Strategic Forces*, 112th Congress, 1st session, November 2, 2011, accessed March 17, 2015, http://www.gpo.gov/fdsys/pkg/CHRG-112hhrg71527/html/CHRG-112hhrg71527.htm.
[13] Hans M. Kristensen, "B61-12: The New Guided Standoff Nuclear Bomb," Federation of American Scientists, May 30, 2013, accessed March 17, 2015, http://fas.org/programs/ssp/nukes/publications1/Brief2013_B61-12.pdf.
[14] Hans M. Kristensen, "B61-12," ibid.
[15] Hans M. Kristensen, "Nuclear Weapons Modernization: A Threat to the NPT?" *Arms Control Association*, May 1, 2014, accessed March 17, 2015, http://www.armscontrol.org/act/2014_05/Nuclear-Weapons-Modernization-A-Threat-to-the-NPT.
[16] Hans M. Kristensen, "B61-12," ibid.
[17] "Nuclear Posture Review," *U.S. Department of Defense*, April 2010, viii-ix, accessed March 16, 2015, http://www.defense.gov/npr/docs/2010%20Nuclear%20Posture%20Review%20Report.pdf.
[18] Cory Gardner, email to author, March 11, 2015.
[19] "Nuclear Posture Review," ibid., vi.