US Nuclear Weapons Spending

February 18, 2014

David Mosher, Assistant Director for the National Security Division at the Congressional Budget Office and Michael Bennett, a nuclear spending analyst, provided an overview of their recent report, Projected Costs of US Nuclear Forces, 2014-2023. They explained that their report is not an alternative estimate, but a projection of current spending. The major takeaway, according to the CBO analysts, is that modernization costs over the next decade will mostly go to cover research and development; only after 2023 will the procurement costs kick in, which are significantly higher than current expenses.

Clark Murdock, Director of the Project on Nuclear Issues at the Center for Strategic and International Studies, does not think that the United States spends an unreasonable amount of money on its nuclear forces. In fact, compared to other countries, the US spends a smaller percentage of both its total defense budget (4%) and total GNP (though the actual dollar amount is much more). Mr. Murdock believes that Russia is actually spending a higher amount than reports indicate and warned that future cyber technology could make our submarines obsolete. Therefore, Mr. Murdock advises that we stop designing and planning our nuclear forces as continuations of the Cold War models and start from scratch.

Steve Pifer, Director of the Arms Control and Non-Proliferation Initiative at the Brookings Institution, argues that there is an opportunity cost for our nuclear forces, even at 4% of the total defense budget. It is possible to have a robust and secure nuclear force at 500 deployed warheads and fewer SSBNs in operation. However, Mr. Pifer believes that the ICBM leg of the triad is worth keeping, as it is by far the least expensive to develop and maintain. Finally, while the bomber leg is vital as a physical projection of power, its purpose as an insurance policy against another state developing an omnipotent missile defense system is rather farfetched. Missile defense is extremely difficult, and a handful of bombers would be sufficient to project United States power.

Speakers:

- David Mosher, Assistant Director, National Security Division, Congressional Budget Office
- Michael Bennett, Analyst, National Security Division, Congressional Budget Office
- Clark Murdock, Director, Project on Nuclear Issues, Center for Strategic and International Studies
- Steve Pifer, Director, Arms Control and Non-Proliferation Initiative, Brookings Institution