The U.S. Nuclear Weapons Budget: Fiscal Year 2016 and Beyond

February 10, 2015

The Congressional Nuclear Security Working Group, co-chaired by Representatives Jeff Fortenberry (R-Texas) and Adam Schiff (D-Calif.), co-hosted a briefing with the Arms Control Association and The Lugar Center to discuss the fiscal year 2016 budget request for nuclear weapons and current plans to rebuild America’s nuclear arsenal. The event provided perspectives on the policy assumptions that undergird the current spending plans, the anticipated affordability of the plans given current budget constraints, options for budget savings, and the necessity of the planned spending.

Amy Woolf, specialist in nuclear weapons policy at the Congressional Research Service, began the discussion by providing an overview of the FY 2016 budget request for nuclear weapons and the long-term financial implications of pursuing current nuclear weapons spending plans. Woolf broke down how President Barack Obama is committed to retaining the “triad” of nuclear weapons delivery systems as affirmed in the 2010 nuclear posture review and reaffirmed by then-Defense Secretary nominee Ashton Carter in his recent nomination hearing before the Senate Armed Services Committee. At the current budget levels Obama has requested for nuclear weapons programs at the Defense and Energy Departments, the United States can reasonably expect to spend $30-35 billion dollars per year over the next 20 to 30 years. That amounts to nearly one trillion dollars over 30 years. Woolf noted that maintaining and rebuilding the current U.S. nuclear force in an age of austerity was likely going to be unsustainable, but that cutting costs would come with its own set of challenges, which would involve domestic politics as well international factors.

Evan Montgomery, senior fellow at the Center for Strategic and Budgetary Assessments, followed Woolf and countered several arguments made in support of reducing nuclear spending. First, in response to the argument that the world is different than during the Cold War and nuclear weapons are no longer needed, Montgomery disagreed that geopolitical competition is a thing of the past, and that in the face of a more hostile Russia and China, geopolitical concerns are still a valid reason for maintaining the nuclear arsenal at its current level. Second, Montgomery countered the claim that if the United States begins to disarm its nuclear weapons systems, so will other countries. He noted that as the United States has brought down its overall numbers of nuclear weapons, proliferation has actually increased globally. Finally, in response to arguments that the United States cannot afford the arsenal it wants to maintain, Montgomery noted that there is a difference between absolute and relative costs. Furthermore, he noted that there are fixed costs associated with the nuclear weapons program that will not be abated even if the number of nuclear warheads or delivery systems are cut down, such as infrastructure, early warning systems, etc.
Hans Kristensen, director of the Nuclear Information Project at the Federation of American Scientists, wrapped up the discussion by arguing for further cuts in both the budget and the nuclear weapons program. According to Kristensen, the fiscal year 2016 budget request proposes a “modernization bonanza.” Kristensen noted that U.S. military officials have already determined that the United States has one-third more nuclear weapons deployed than needed to meet current U.S. national security requirements. Kristensen went on to proposes a number of steps that could be taken to scale back current nuclear spending plans without undermining U.S. security, such as reducing the number of ballistic missile submarines, delaying plans for a new nuclear-armed cruise missile, and delaying plans for a new long-range strike bomber. Over all, Kristensen maintained that right now, there is no grave national security threat large enough to justify the excessive size of the U.S. nuclear arsenal.

Speakers:

● **Ms. Amy Woolf**, specialist in nuclear weapons policy at the Congressional Research Service
  ● Related Publication: "Nuclear Modernization in an Age of Austerity" Arms Control Today, March 2013

● **Mr. Evan Montgomery**, senior fellow at the Center for Strategic and Budgetary Assessments

● **Mr. Hans Kristensen**, director of the Nuclear Information Project at the Federation of American Scientists;

Source: Arms Control Association

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