



## **WILL US GAIN SAY ITS NPT OBLIGATIONS?**

*Dr. Sitakanta Mishra  
Research Fellow, CAPS*

Contrary to what President Barack Obama is proclaiming on nuclear disarmament, a recent Congressional Budget Office (CBO) report has proposed that the US government spend \$355 billion over the next 10 years to upgrade and develop new generation of nuclear weapons. <sup>i</sup> This is “nearly \$150 billion more than administration’s \$208.5 billion estimate to Congress last year”. <sup>ii</sup>

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The proposed budgetary plan includes modernization and maintenance of submarines, bombers and missiles that will cost about \$136 billion. Specifically, it will initiate modernization of “the 1970s-era weapons, and in some case replacement of the 1960s-model vacuum tubes with current-day electronics.”<sup>iii</sup> In addition, the Pentagon may consider replacement of the triad of delivery systems, including new class of ballistic missile submarines and a new type of long-range bomber. Last year, the US Air Force General Robert Kehler, former head of U.S. Strategic Command, had called for a “multi-decade effort to recapitalize [US] nuclear deterrent force and its supporting infrastructure.” <sup>iv</sup> President Obama has reportedly endorsed this proposal as necessary to boost the security of the arms and to give US political and military leaders the confidence to negotiate further reductions in the nuclear arsenal. <sup>v</sup>

By mulling over this budgetary plan, one can sense that nuclear weapons are not cheap to hold and, at the same time, have outlived all disarmament aspirations. Domestically, the plan would force difficult “trade-offs between nuclear and non-nuclear deterrence considerations,” and to a possible mismatch in the perceived contemporary security threats, says Kingston Reif, Director at the Center for Arms Control and Non-Proliferation.<sup>vi</sup> Specifically, if endorsed in letter and spirit, the plan would result in cuts in the spending on conventional forces. A point to ponder is whether the conventional forces will be able to withstand any consolidation necessitated by the price burden of refurbishing the nuclear systems. Also, one may question the rationality of the modernization plan when the safe-keep of hundreds of nuclear missiles on hair-trigger alert for decades in underground silos are “in distress, if not in decline.”<sup>vii</sup> For that matter, a number of incidents in the US nuclear force management reported in recent years bring home the impression that stringent reforms are warranted in the oversight process of nuclear-weapons.<sup>viii</sup>

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Globally, this will have serious ramifications, especially on the nuclear non-proliferation discourse. Many would view this as a violation of “the affirmative obligation posited by the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty (NPT)”<sup>ix</sup> – all nuclear weapon state parties are obliged to begin the process of nuclear disarmament so that other countries could be dissuaded from getting nuclear weapons technologies themselves. More importantly, when Obama Administration managed to persuade Iran to commit to its NPT obligations, its new budgetary plan for refurbishing the Cold War era nuclear weapons would send a wrong signal that US’ votary for nuclear non-proliferation is all rhetoric.

Under the New START treaty, President Obama is committed to reducing deployed strategic nuclear weapons to 1,550 per side by 2018.<sup>x</sup> He also indicated in his Berlin speech that this figure could be further reduced to between 1,000 and 1,100. While meeting its bilateral and multilateral disarmament obligations, the United States has to ensure

effective nuclear umbrella to its allies. Logically, with such minimal number of warheads, the United States has to refurbish or replace and modernize its nuclear weapon inventory robustly. The suggestions in the report in fact indicate a new expansion and upgrade inventiveness in US nuclear weapon inventory leading to the development of a new generation of nuclear weapons, which is likely to spread the impression that US nuclear policy is “aimed at bullying other countries”.<sup>xi</sup>

*(Disclaimer: The views and opinions expressed in this article are those of the author and do not necessarily reflect the position of the Centre for Air Power Studies CAPS)*

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<sup>i</sup> “Projected Costs of U.S. Nuclear Forces, 2014 to 2023”, <http://www.cbo.gov/sites/default/files/cbofiles/attachments/12-19-2013-nuclearforces.pdf>

<sup>ii</sup> “Are New Nuclear Weapons Affordable?”, [http://www.huffingtonpost.com/joe-cirincione/are-new-nuclear-weapons-a\\_b\\_4482042.html?Utm\\_hp\\_ref=politics](http://www.huffingtonpost.com/joe-cirincione/are-new-nuclear-weapons-a_b_4482042.html?Utm_hp_ref=politics)

<sup>iii</sup> David Alexander, “US Nuclear Weapon Plans to Cost \$355 Billion Over a Decade - CBO Report”, <http://uk.reuters.com/article/2013/12/20/uk-usa-nuclear-arms-idUKBRE9BJ1EY20131220>, December 20, 2013.

<sup>iv</sup> “Nuclear Weapons Modernization Programs: Military, Technical, and Political Requirements for the B61 Life Extension Program and Future Stockpile Strategy”, [www.hsdl.org/?view&did=747337](http://www.hsdl.org/?view&did=747337), October 29, 2013.

<sup>v</sup> “U.S. Nuclear Arms Overhaul Needed to Ensure Reliability - Officials”, [http://articles.chicagotribune.com/2013-10-29/news/sns-rt-usa-defensenuclear-20131029\\_1\\_weapons-u-s-house-arms-control](http://articles.chicagotribune.com/2013-10-29/news/sns-rt-usa-defensenuclear-20131029_1_weapons-u-s-house-arms-control), October 29, 2013.

<sup>vi</sup> “Reliable Replacement Warhead Disadvantage”, [http://www.debatecoaches.org/openev-archive/files/download/Reliable\\_Replacement\\_Warhead\\_Disadvantage\\_Paper\\_Michigan.docx](http://www.debatecoaches.org/openev-archive/files/download/Reliable_Replacement_Warhead_Disadvantage_Paper_Michigan.docx)

<sup>vii</sup> Robert Burns, “US Nuclear Missiles are a Force in Much Distress”, [http://www.elpasotimes.com/latestnews/ci\\_24773662/us-nuclear-missiles-are-force-much-distress](http://www.elpasotimes.com/latestnews/ci_24773662/us-nuclear-missiles-are-force-much-distress)

<sup>viii</sup> “Recap of AP Reporting on Troubles in Nuclear Force”, <http://www.utsandiego.com/news/2013/dec/21/recap-of-ap-reporting-on-troubles-in-nuclear-force/>

<sup>ix</sup> Brian Becker, “US Nuclear Expansion Aims to Bully States: Analyst”, <http://www.presstv.ir/detail/2013/12/23/341564/us-bullies-other-states-with-nexpansion/>

<sup>x</sup> John Huotari, “Corker Calls for Continued Commitment to Nuclear Modernization”, <http://oakridgetoday.com/2014/01/13/corker-calls-continued-commitment-nuclear-modernization/>, January 13, 2014.

<sup>xi</sup> Becker, n. 9.