

Nuclear Watch new mexico

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Proposed Nuke Cuts a Step in the Right Direction -- New Nuclear Weapons Production Facilities And Military Capabilities Should Be Cut As Well

Santa Fe, NM - According to a major article published today by the Center for Public Integrity, the Obama Administration is preparing to release a long-awaited "Implementation Study" as a follow on to its 2010 Nuclear Posture Review. This study will reportedly lower the number of deployed strategic nuclear weapons to 1,000 - 1,100 from the 1,550 each pledged to by Russia and the U.S. in the New Strategic Arms Reduction Treaty arms control agreement. In December 2010 the U.S. Senate ratified New START, which Republican senators used to extract funding commitments for "modernization" of both the nuclear weapons stockpile and the National Nuclear Security Administration's research and production complex.

Nuclear Watch New Mexico applauds further cuts to strategic nuclear weapons as an excellent step in the right direction. But as the Center for Public Integrity points out the Obama Administration considered but rejected a "deterrence only" nuclear posture that would require only some 500 warheads to back up the officially declared policy of deterring others. This is in contrast to the 1,000+ weapons needed for nuclear warfighting and first strike capability (which the U.S. has never renounced).

So-called modernization of the U.S. stockpile involves increasingly aggressive Life Extension Programs (LEPs) that prolong the service lives of existing nuclear weapons 30 years or more. LEPs and/or other modifications also provide existing nuclear weapons with new military capabilities, which generally involve substituting lower yield nuclear weapons for higher yield weapons. Two past examples are: 1) a 1997 modification of the B61 bomb into a 350 kiloton earth-penetrator, taking over the mission of the 9 megaton B53 surface-burst bomb to destroy hardened, deeply buried targets; and 2) the current LEP for the sub-launched W76 Trident warhead, retrofitting it with a new-design fuze that is believed capable of selecting more precise heights-of-burst. In combination with increased warhead accuracy, this gives the 100-kiloton W76 the hard target kill capability of the more powerful 450-kiloton W88 Trident warhead. [For perspective's sake, the Hiroshima and Nagasaki atomic bombs were ~16 and ~21 kilotons respectively, together instantly killing at least 130,000 people.]

The U.S. has officially and repeatedly declared to the entire world (notably at the United Nations' 2010 NonProliferation Treaty Review Conference) that it will not produce new-design nuclear weapons. Simultaneously high-level government officials also pledged that the U.S. would never give existing nuclear weapons new military capabilities.

However Jay Coghlan, Nuclear Watch NM Director, points out, "Substituting more usable lower-yield nuclear weapons for higher-yield weapons is undeniably a new military capability in and of itself. At the same time, we are undermining our own national security, first through the bad proliferation example we set for others, and second by possibly lowering confidence in stockpile reliability through the introduction of major changes to our extensively tested nuclear weapons. Further cuts to deployed strategic nuclear weapons are clearly a very good thing. But the next needed step is for all nuclear weapons powers, including the U.S., to adopt a deterrence-only posture that conservatively maintains nuclear arsenals while awaiting negotiated, verified disarmament."

As a case in point for the need to preserve the tested pedigree of the stockpile, the new-design fuze for the W76 (in part responsible for its new military capability) had initial design problems that delayed start up of its Life Extension Program. Future LEPs could be even more aggressive, with for example a proposed joint warhead replacing both the W78 ICBM warhead and the sub-launched W88 while using the plutonium pit core of yet a third type of warhead. This inevitably raises the question of at what point does a reputedly refurbished nuclear weapon become a "new" weapon, directly contradicting officially declared policy and creating a terrible proliferation example.

Lower stockpile numbers coupled with prudent, conservative maintenance of nuclear weapons creates less need for strategic bombers, subs, missiles and nuclear weapons production facilities, in turn leading to huge, urgently needed taxpayers savings and enhanced national security. Coghlan concluded, "This should be the final straw for the proposed ~\$6 billion CMRR facility for expanded plutonium pit production at the Los Alamos Lab, which has been postponed for at least 5 years because of budget pressures. Today's revelation of lower nuclear stockpile numbers should put a permanent end to this plutonium boondoggle for a shrinking nuclear weapons stockpile, giving some relief to the American taxpayer while promoting a safer world."

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The Center for Public Integrity's news article "Obama administration embraces major new nuclear weapons cut" is available at <http://www.publicintegrity.org/2013/02/08/12156/obama-administration-embraces-major-new-nuclear-weapons-cut>

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