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Can the U.S. Afford Modern Nukes?

Forty billion dollars a year isn't much for America's survival.

By Matthew R. Costlow, June 14, 2017, <https://www.wsj.com/articles/can-the-u-s-afford-modern-nukes-1497395359>

When President Obama left the White House, he punted on a tough choice: how to modernize the U.S. nuclear force. In the coming weeks, the Congressional Budget Office is expected to release a report that estimates modernization as currently proposed would cost \$1.2 trillion over 30 years, or about \$40 billion a year. Congress and the Trump administration shouldn't be intimidated by the ostensibly big number.

The plan analyzed by the CBO would replace the nuclear delivery systems of bombers, missiles and submarines with new ones that incorporate the latest safety and survival features. These changes would enable some systems to perform well into the 2080s. It's ambitious, but this program isn't the budget buster nuclear disarmament supporters describe.

Under the plan, spending on the nuclear arsenal would peak in the late 2020s at about [6.5%](#) of the Defense Department budget, up from 3.2% today. Recall that military spending consumes only about 15% of the federal budget.

But determining whether modernization is affordable involves more than cost considerations. The Pentagon simultaneously has to consider its priorities and the costs of weapons systems when determining the best way to protect U.S. interests. According to the Defense Department, the two highest priorities of U.S. strategy are "the survival of the nation" and "the prevention of a catastrophic attack against U.S. territory." The Pentagon's [Quadrennial Defense Review](#) lists "a secure and effective nuclear deterrent" at the top of a list describing how to achieve such priorities.

Given that the U.S. nuclear arsenal helps to deter the only existential threat to the U.S., major nuclear war, its value can't be measured by traditional dollar metrics alone. Budgets are about

trade-offs and priorities. As the vice chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, Gen. Paul Selva, [testified](#) earlier this year, “We are emphasizing the nuclear mission over other modernization programs when faced with that choice.”

Critics will cry that every dollar spent on nuclear weapons, which have not been set off in anger since World War II, is a dollar taken from those who are fighting wars right now. But as then-Defense Secretary Ash Carter [explained](#) in a speech last year, U.S. nuclear forces are the “bedrock” of American security and the “highest priority mission” of the Defense Department. They enable current war fighters to achieve their missions.

Even those in the military who could stand to miss out on spending increases because of nuclear modernization efforts, like U.S. Army Chief of Staff Gen. Mark A. Milley, support modernization: “It’s not even an Army system and it needs to be overhauled and brought back up to the level of readiness.”

The federal government can afford to spend less than 1% of its multitrillion-dollar budget on nuclear modernization. And with Russia, China and North Korea all upgrading their nuclear weapons capabilities, just about the only thing the U.S. can’t afford is to end its modernization efforts before they begin.

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