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# NUCLEAR PROLIFERATION UPDATE

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## Nuclear Weapons Spending Deserves Greater Scrutiny

*By Christopher A. Preble*

**T**he U.S. nuclear arsenal is enormous and costly. Few Americans understand just how costly, however, because the program is one of the least transparent features within the massive federal budget. Thus, the seemingly simple question—“How much money do we spend on nuclear weapons?”—defies a simple answer.

Beyond money for the care and maintenance of our arsenal, other nuclear weapons-related activities are contained within a number of federal government departments and agencies, including the departments of Energy, Homeland Security, Health and Human Services, Justice, Labor, State, and Commerce. Many agencies receive millions dollars for emergency response or nuclear-threat reduction; others receive billions for environmental cleanup or research. There is no comprehensive system to determine how much money is spent across the bureaucracy.

Even within the Department of Defense, many of the same programs and platforms that support nuclear weapons also perform nonnuclear missions: a B-2 bomber can launch both conventional munitions and nuclear weapons. From a strictly accounting perspective, it is difficult to assess what share of B-2 operations should be counted as part of the nuclear budget. The Pentagon doesn't even attempt to do so.

Even the most diligent research to put together a comprehensive figure for nuclear security spending would likely fail to include every dollar spent. That is because major elements are hidden behind a veil of secrecy. Susan Shaer, executive director for Women's Action for Nuclear Disarmament points out that the nuclear weapons complex “started out as the most secret imaginable enterprise with people living right next to major nuclear weapons facilities and thinking” that the plants were manufacturing innocuous consumer products. “That culture has carried through to today.”

Travis Sharp of the Center for Arms Control and Non-Proliferation agrees. “The U.S. nuclear weapons budget is opaque today because it has always been that way. The result is

a nuclear bureaucracy historically and culturally predisposed to withholding information.” He concludes that secrecy is justified “on technical and operational topics,” but “on budgetary matters it is not.”

In the most comprehensive study of nuclear weapons spending, published earlier this year by the Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, authors Stephen Schwartz and Deepti Choubey conclude that U.S. taxpayers spent at least \$52.8 billion in fiscal year 2008—a reasonable floor based solely on information in the public domain. The actual top-line budget, which includes classified and intelligence-related activities, is surely higher—and likely much higher. Schwartz and Choubey show that about 55 percent (\$29.1 billion) of the budget goes toward operating, upgrading, and sustaining the U.S. nuclear arsenal. Another 15.8 percent (\$8.3 billion) goes toward deferred environmental and health costs.

The allocation of resources within this massive budget, as with all other aspects of federal spending, is highly politicized. For example, although President Obama pledged to secure all vulnerable nuclear weapons and materials within four years, his administration requested less money for nonproliferation activities than Congress appropriated in FY 2009. One explanation for this disconnect between the president's rhetoric and budgetary reality is the political interests involved: members of Congress can claim that funding for weapons programs helps to employ U.S. workers; by contrast, the Cooperative Threat Reduction program and other initiatives aimed at reducing the number of nuclear weapons, and at improving security at nuclear facilities overseas, is perceived to go primarily to foreigners.

Then there is the problem of waste—not the nuclear kind, but rather the reckless spending and the utterly inadequate system of oversight currently in place to prevent it. To be sure, the lack of transparency within the nuclear weapons budget impedes effective monitoring. But the inability to get a handle on spending also reflects an unwillingness on the part of the myriad interests arrayed within the nuclear weapons complex

## **NUCLEAR PROLIFERATION UPDATE**

*is dedicated to promoting peaceful resolutions to the nuclear crises in North Korea and Iran. It aims to provide policy makers with analysis on the latest developments in both nations and options for formulating coherent U.S. responses. In highlighting the importance of achieving diplomatic solutions, the goal is to avoid armed conflict and its attendant consequences.*

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to come clean on what is spent by whom, and where.

The motivations of these interests in concealing the costs of our nuclear weapons are clear. Still, such efforts might ultimately prove counterproductive if taxpayers and their representatives in Congress are unable to determine with confidence that billions of dollars are being allocated properly and efficiently. What little we do know suggests that they are not.

For example, from the publicly available data, the Department of Energy receives the lion's share of the dollars connected to the care and feeding of the nation's nuclear arsenal. Indeed, DoE funding is relatively transparent as compared with spending within DoD and the intelligence agencies. Given its relative openness, however, it is somewhat ironic that DoE has developed a reputation for mismanagement.

Of particular concern is the Office of Environmental Management, which was authorized to spend \$5.6 billion on environmental cleanup and nuclear waste disposal in FY 2010. It is reasonable to expect, based on past experience, that

much of this money will be misallocated, or simply lost. Huge cost overruns have been common with OEM cleanup projects. But when House and Senate conferees ultimately shifted money away from cleanup and into weapons programs, the move seemed grounded chiefly in parochialism—not concerns over OEM's poor track record.

Nuclear weapons-related spending might be warranted if the money was likely to advance American security, and do so at a reasonable cost. Programmatic reforms, beginning with a full and public accounting of all spending, are essential to making this a reality. The public should demand greater transparency, consistent with the obvious need to maintain operational security at our nuclear weapons facilities, and should hold government officials accountable for poor performance within their respective agencies. The pattern documented here, however, suggests that abuse and waste will persist so long as we choose to maintain an enormous nuclear arsenal of dubious practical utility. ■

*—The author thanks Harrison Moar for his invaluable assistance on this article.*

## **Can the United States Affect Iran's Nuclear Ambitions?**

**“Trying to isolate nuclear powers, even obnoxious and unpredictable ones like Iran and North Korea, is a futile and potentially dangerous approach.”**

**—TED GALEN CARPENTER,**  
writing in the  
*National Interest (Online)*

**I**ran's nuclear program raises the prospect of either a nuclear-armed Tehran or another counter-proliferation war in the Middle East. Destabilizing political developments within the country have added greatly to the complexity of pursuing a third option. How to move forward in negotiations was the topic of a Capitol Hill Briefing “Can the United States Affect Iran's Nuclear Ambitions?”

Matthew Duss, national security researcher at the Center for American Progress, argued that the disputed presidential election of June 12 was a huge disruptive event in Iran's domestic politics, and cast a pall of doubt on Iran's claims to being an Islamic republic as opposed to a conventional authoritarian regime. Fracturing clerical support for the regime promises to make any negotiations more complicated. Ultimately, Duss said, Iran's nuclear program and the resulting P5+1

negotiations are a football in the political battles within the country.

Cato's Associate Director of Foreign Policy Studies Justin Logan followed Duss's remarks by saying that although he supports diplomacy he is skeptical that a diplomatic solution will resolve the broader issue, arguing that “lengthening the fuse” is the best we can realistically expect. He emphasized that there is no need for panic, however. We have no evidence that Iran is close to “break out” capacity, but we do have a long history of overestimating the country's progress in pursuing nuclear technology. He cautioned against congressional sanctions, which do not have a history of positive outcomes, especially when imposed on oil-rich countries. Additionally, we should avoid attempts to divine Iran's intentions, which may be unknown even to the Iranians. ■