

Obama administration spending billions on new global strike weapons

Bill Van Auken
24 April 2010

The Obama administration is spending billions of dollars to develop new weapons systems, including powerful conventional warhead missiles capable of striking any target in the world within less than an hour.

The US Air Force carried out two separate test launches April 22—one at Vandenberg Air Force Base in California, and the other at Cape Canaveral, Florida—designed to further the development of these weapons systems.

The first system, known as Conventional Prompt Global Strike, or CPGS, would be capable of striking anywhere across the globe within under an hour of a launch order, using intercontinental ballistic missiles fired from the US to deliver conventional warheads against targets in other countries.

Capable of striking a target with an impact speed of up to 4,000 feet per second and a payload of up to 8,000 pounds, these warheads would be able to obliterate everything within a 3,000-foot radius.

The Obama administration has requested \$240 million in appropriations by Congress to pay for developing CPGS in 2011, an increase of 45 percent over this year's budget. The total cost of the program is expected to mount to over \$2 billion by 2015, by which time the Pentagon hopes to have deployed the first elements of the weapons system.

The Defense Advanced Research Projects Agency (DARPA) carried out a test launch Thursday of a space plane known as the Falcon, or Hypersonic Technology Vehicle (HTV-2), a suborbital vehicle that is the prototype for the CPGS delivery system.

It was launched from Vandenberg Air Force Base on a decommissioned ballistic missile, from which the plane separated just outside of the atmosphere, hurtling back to the Earth at a speed of more than 13,000 miles per hour, more than 20 times the speed of sound. The plane was supposed to crash into the Pacific Ocean near a US

military test site on the Kwajalein Atoll.

The other unmanned space vehicle launched Thursday from Cape Canaveral was the X-37B. The Pentagon remained tight-lipped about the highly classified program, refusing to say even when the 29-foot plane—which resembles a smaller version of the space shuttle—would return to earth, much less specify what it was carrying or give any detailed explanation of its mission.

While it is estimated that the cost of developing the X-37B will run into the billions, the precise amount also remains classified, included as part of the Pentagon's "black" budget.

Gary Payton, the deputy undersecretary for Air Force space programs, would say only that the test flight was designed to further "development programs that will provide capabilities for our warfighters in the future."

It is widely believed that the vehicle is being developed as part of a US effort to militarize space, providing a weapons platform and launch pad for smaller spy satellites. There is also speculation that it is being developed as part of the Prompt Global Strike system.

Advocates of Prompt Global Strike have promoted the weapons system as a means to respond instantaneously to intelligence on the location of alleged terrorists or supposed threats of an imminent launch of weapons of mass destruction. They have also argued that the deployment of the new weapons would reduce the dependence of the US military on its nuclear arsenal.

Critics, including Russian officials, have pointed out, however, that the launching of intercontinental ballistic missiles, even if they were carrying conventional warheads, could easily trigger a nuclear war.

"World states will hardly accept a situation in which nuclear weapons disappear, but weapons that are no less destabilizing emerge in the hands of certain members of the international community," Russian Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov told reporters earlier this month in

Moscow.

In a state of the nation address following the announcement of the proposed weapons system under the Bush administration, then-Russian President Vladimir Putin warned, “The launch of such a missile could provoke a full-scale counterattack using strategic nuclear forces.”

Largely as a result of such warnings, Congress previously failed to provide funding for the program. The proposal “really hadn’t gone anywhere in the Bush administration,” Defense Secretary Robert Gates said in an interview on the ABC news program “This Week.” Gates, who was held over in his post by incoming President Barack Obama, noted that the weapons system had been “embraced by the new administration.”

The *New York Times* reported Friday that in an interview Obama had defended the weapons system as a “move towards less emphasis on nuclear weapons” and argued that it would insure “that our conventional weapons capability is an effective deterrent in all but the most extreme circumstances.”

In a separate interview with the *Times*, Air Force Gen. Kevin Chilton, the head of the Strategic Command, argued that the weapons system was needed to give the White House more military options.

“Today we can present some conventional options to the President to strike a target anywhere on the globe that range from 96 hours, to several hours maybe, 4, 5, 6 hours,” Chilton told the *Times*.

“That would simply not be fast enough, he noted, if intelligence arrived about a movement by Al Qaeda terrorists or the imminent launching of a missile,” the newspaper said. “‘If the president wants to act on a particular target faster than that, the only thing we have that goes faster is a nuclear response,’ he said.”

Advocates of the program within the military and the administration have claimed that the danger of Russia or China interpreting the launch of a Prompt Global Strike missile as the beginning of a nuclear attack could be alleviated by positioning launch vehicles above ground, giving them a different flight path and even opening launch sites up for inspection. Military analysts point out, however, that such a system would provide an ideal subterfuge in the event that Washington decided to launch a “preventive” nuclear war.

Moscow’s concern over the proposed weapons system found expression in the recently signed New Start nuclear weapons treaty agreed by the US and Russia, which requires that the introduction of any US intercontinental

ballistic missile carrying a conventional weapon capable of reaching Russian soil be compensated by the decommissioning of an existing nuclear-armed missile.

Obama’s rhetoric about the new weapons system contributing to nuclear disarmament notwithstanding, there is ample evidence that Washington remains committed to maintaining and upgrading its nuclear arsenal.

Speaking Thursday at the NATO foreign ministers meeting in Estonia, Secretary of State Hillary Clinton rejected proposals from European governments for the removal of so-called tactical or battlefield nuclear weapons that the US has deployed on the continent.

“We should recognize that as long as nuclear weapons exist, NATO will remain a nuclear alliance,” Clinton told the gathering in Tallinn. “As a nuclear alliance, sharing nuclear risks and responsibilities widely is fundamental.”

Meanwhile, at a recent hearing of the House Armed Services Committee, General Chilton, the head of the US Strategic Command, assured members of Congress that the military is proceeding with work on a “follow-on to the current Ohio-class Trident submarine fleet,” which carries D-5 nuclear-armed intercontinental ballistic missiles.

Sounding the same theme, James Miller, the principal deputy undersecretary of defense for policy, said, “The department is currently looking at the mix of long-range strike capabilities that the military will need for the coming decade or two,” adding that both nuclear and conventional weapons would figure in this “mix.”

The development of these new weapons systems will only provide Washington and the Pentagon with another instrument for carrying out so-called “preventive wars” and acts of aggression, giving the US president a non-nuclear capacity to kill thousands of people virtually instantaneously with the push of a button.



To contact the WSWS and the
Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact