US plans to invest $1 trillion in nuclear weapons arsenal

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The *New York Times* reported on Monday that the Obama administration is planning to spend more than $1 trillion over the next three decades to significantly upgrade its nuclear weapons capability.

The front-page article, authored by William J. Broad and David E. Sanger, serves a definite political purpose. It is a warning to Russia, China and any other country that may try to stand in the way of the American ruling class that the US military is preparing for nuclear war.

The *Times* writes: “With Russia on the warpath, China pressing its own territorial claims and Pakistan expanding its arsenal, the overall chances for Mr. Obama’s legacy of disarmament look increasingly dim, analysts say.”

The newspaper quotes Harvard Professor Gary Samore, Obama’s former chief nuclear weapons advisor and a stand-in for the administration itself: “The most fundamental game changer is Putin’s invasion of Ukraine. That has made any measure to reduce the stockpile unilaterally politically impossible,” he told the *Times* .

While the *Times* article is couched in the language of defense, in relation to both Russia and China the US has played the role of aggressor. The US and its allies in Europe organized a right-wing coup in Ukraine that has been followed by a campaign of sanctions and war threats against Russia. And the Obama administration has been carrying out a “pivot to Asia,” asserting its control over the Asia-Pacific while encouraging the remilitarization of Japan.

These confrontations, as well possible conflicts with European powers, pose the danger of nuclear war. Moreover, in its conflicts with Iran, Syria and other smaller countries, there can be no doubt that the US military is preparing for the use of nuclear weapons as well. It should be recalled that the United States is the only country in the world to have ever used nuclear weapons in combat: the dropping of two atomic bombs on Japan at the end of the Second World War.

As part of these preparations, the US military is retooling its nuclear arsenal. The White House had announced in August that it would be reviewing its atomic spending plans in advance of next year’s Congressional budget request, which will set spending for 2016.

Amidst continued austerity and endless claims that there is no money for basic social programs, the US military is spending vast sums on this project. The Congressional Budget Office estimates that the Obama administration’s current atomic weapon plan will cost at least $355 billion in the first ten years alone. The plan is focused on developing and deploying nuclear weapons that are more powerful and reliable, yet smaller, than the current warheads. This will serve Obama’s publicly stated goal of reducing both the number and tonnage of nuclear weapons held in US stockpiles, while increasing the targeting capability of delivery systems and destructiveness of the warheads.

The administration's modernization plans include the refurbishment of existing nuclear warheads, development and construction of improved nuclear weapon delivery systems, and the upgrading of major nuclear weapons plants and laboratories.

According to the Bulletin of Atomic Scientists, the United States currently maintains an estimated 4,650 deliverable war heads. Of these, 2,120 are currently deployed on ballistic missiles. Under the terms of the New START treaty signed with Russia in 2010, the US is required to reduce the number of deployed war heads to 1,550 by early 2018.

When President Barack Obama was awarded the

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Nobel Peace Prize in 2009, the committee placed special emphasis on his "vision of and work for a world without nuclear weapons." In spite of Obama's supposed vision and public calls for the elimination of the threat of nuclear weapons, he is committed to a development of the country's nuclear weapon infrastructure that will increase both the precision and lethality of its stockpile.

The Obama administration's 2010 Nuclear Posture Review (NPR) reasserted the US government's right to a nuclear first strike against other nuclear-armed powers and countries Washington deems to be in violation of the Non-Proliferation Treaty, i.e., Iran, Russia and China.

Ruling out the use of nuclear weapons in retaliation against non-nuclear states that deploy chemical weapons, the NPR made clear that in "extreme circumstances" the United States still reserves the right to use nuclear weapons "to defend the vital interests of the United States or its allies and partners."

The United States nuclear weapons industrial complex, overseen by the National Nuclear Security Administration, consists of eight plants and laboratories across the country, from the Lawrence Livermore National Laboratory in California to the Savannah River Site in South Carolina. It employs more than 40,000 people. At least 26 upgrades to these facilities have been approved and a further 36 have been proposed.

A $550 million fortification project was completed in 2011 at the Y-12 National Security Complex in Oak Ridge, Tennessee, which serves as the main supplier of highly enriched uranium bomb fuel in the United States. The price of a new project at Y-12 to upgrade uranium processing facilities has risen from $6.5 billion to $19 billion.

The latest addition to this network is the National Security Campus, which opened in 2012 in suburban Kansas City, Missouri, and was built at the cost of approximately $700 million. Employees at the plant are currently working on refurbishing nuclear warheads built in the 1970s, which are utilized by the Navy on its 14 Ohio class nuclear submarines. Each of these submarines is capable of carrying and firing 24 nuclear-armed ballistic missiles.

Costs for modernization projects are projected to soar further in the second and third decades of the plan, reaching the trillion dollar mark as current nuclear-capable bombers, submarines, and missiles reach obsolescence and must be replaced. The administration has requested that the Pentagon make plans to purchase 12 new ballistic missile submarines and 400 new or refurbished land-based missiles.

A report released in January by the James Martin Center for Nonproliferation Studies (CNS), "The Trillion Dollar Nuclear Triad," details the administration's plans to spend at least $100 billion for 100 new long-range strategic manned bombers, and a further $30-40 billion to build the nuclear bombs and cruise missiles to arm them.

The CNS report notes that the budget requests for the country's nuclear weapons program have been largely unaffected by recent budget cuts since they were exempted from the 2013 budget sequestration cuts.

The report also indicates that $1 trillion is a conservative estimate for the total cost over the next three decades. Defense procurement programs often go as much as 50 percent over budget, and estimates do not consider the cost of dismantling weapons systems or paying out benefits to retired military personnel.

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