

U.S. Plans Balanced Cuts to Nuclear Launchers Under Treaty With Russia

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WASHINGTON — The U.S. will scale back its land, sea and air nuclear missile launchers under the New START treaty with Russia, but it will not retire a ballistic missile squadron as some lawmakers had expected, U.S. officials told Reuters.

The U.S. military will disable four missile launch tubes on each of its 14 nuclear submarines, convert 30 B-52 nuclear bombers to conventional use and empty 50 intercontinental ballistic missile silos, senior administration officials said on condition of anonymity.

The plan is expected to be formally announced on Tuesday.

One official said the government wanted to maintain flexibility across its land, sea and air weapons systems. "It provides us a bit of a hedge," the official said.

The New START treaty, which was agreed in 2010 and went into force on Feb. 5, 2011, called for the U.S. and Russia to cut their deployed nuclear weapons to 1,550 apiece by 2018, down from the previous ceiling of 2,200.

The U.S. total nuclear stockpile, including deployed and nondeployed, tactical and strategic nuclear weapons was 5,113, the government said in 2010.

Some lawmakers had voiced concerns that an entire ballistic missile squadron would be eliminated under the treaty.

"Because they [cuts] will be spread across the three different bases, we will not close a squadron," another official said, also on condition of anonymity.

The New START treaty also calls for each side to reduce its total number of nuclear delivery systems to no more than 800.

U.S. weapons makers are keeping a close eye on the U.S. government's plans to modernize its nuclear weapons and the platforms that carry them, an effort estimated by analysts to cost \$355 billion in coming decades.

Boeing has teamed with Lockheed Martin to compete against Northrop Grumman to build a new bomber to carry nuclear weapons. General Dynamics is leading early design work on a new submarine to replace the Ohio-class submarines that carry nuclear weapons.

Huntington Ingalls Industries is also likely to get a large share of the work.

The U.S. currently has 886 deployed and nondeployed delivery systems, the senior administration officials said, comprising 454 Minuteman III intercontinental ballistic missiles, 336 Trident II submarine-launched ballistic missiles and 96 B-2 and B-52 bombers.

To eliminate the 86 excess launchers and reach the total 800 deployed and nondeployed systems, the Pentagon will alter four launch tubes on each of the 14 Trident submarines to render them unusable, eliminating 56 delivery systems. It also will convert 30 B-52 bombers to conventional use, the officials said.

To ensure the number of total deployed launchers is no more than 700, the Defense Department will have two Trident ballistic missile submarines in overhaul at any given time, which would mean their 40 missiles would be nondeployed.

It would maintain six nuclear bombers in nondeployed status, including three test aircraft.

The Air Force has four missile silos for testing that would be considered nondeployed, the officials said. In addition it would remove the missiles from 50 launchers at the three U.S. nuclear bases: F.E. Warren in southeast Wyoming, Minot in North Dakota and Malmstrom in Montana, the officials said.

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