



PRESIDENT PURSUES CONTROVERSIAL NUCLEAR WEAPONS TECHNOLOGY

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With the release of President Bush's budget Monday lawmakers will once again debate whether to fund a controversial research program designed to create nuclear weapons that can penetrate and destroy underground targets.

Defense Secretary Donald Rumsfeld wants Congress to restore funding to determine if an existing nuclear warhead could be fitted with a hardened casing to boost its ability to hit underground targets. The research is necessary, he argues, to protect the United States from countries that are developing and storing weapons of mass destruction underground.

The key Republican who blocked the funding for the Robust Nuclear Earth Penetrator (RNEP) last year has said that he may support it this year.

Republican David Hobson of Ohio, chairman of the House subcommittee that oversees the U.S. nuclear weapons stockpile, said he hoped to spark a dialogue on nuclear weapons' role in national security.

What are 'bunker busters'?

RNEPs -- aka "bunker busters" -- are nuclear bombs with hard shells that can theoretically penetrate hundreds of feet into the ground. The idea is to limit the amount of damage done above ground by sending a bomb through rock, steel or concrete before detonating.

Current warheads can only tunnel up to 30 feet and have never been tested, FOX News reported. In order to destroy a target buried more than 1,000 feet, a bomb that can only burrow several hundred feet would require an explosion ten times greater than that of the atomic bomb dropped on Hiroshima during World War II.

The U.S. Defense Department says countries like North Korea and Iran, suspected of pursuing nuclear weapons programs, are protecting military assets by hiding them underground in fortified bunkers. There are currently at least 10,000 bunkers in over 70 countries, according to the Defense Intelligence Agency.

"We can't necessarily match Cold War weapons to the new threats. We have to adapt capabilities that we have to meet the threats," said Major Paul Swiergosz, a department spokesman.

Critics

But critics warn that pursuing new nuclear bomb technologies could hinder international nonproliferation efforts.

“You can’t tell everyone ‘don’t touch nuclear weapons’ while continuing to build them,” International Atomic Energy Agency Director Mohamed ElBaradei told The Washington Post.

Two Democratic House members, Edward Markey of Massachusetts and Ellen Tauscher of California, are also critical of the Defense Department's plan.

Tauscher said the request is “a waste of money on a weapon commanders in the field have not asked for, is of highly questionable utility, and may trigger a new global nuclear arms race.”

“The Bush budget request for new nuclear weapons will face tough scrutiny by the Congress and I am hopeful that these requests will again be rejected,” Markey said in a statement.

A call for dialogue

Congressman Hobson, who directed last year’s funds to programs focusing on ways to improve the reliability and lifespan of existing warheads to avoid new tests, was initially against the idea.

"When we want countries such as Iran and North Korea to abandon nuclear weapons development, it is hypocritical for the United States to embark on new weapons and testing initiatives," Hobson said in the Washington Times newspaper.

But in a recent speech, he described himself as open-minded, saying that if the Defense Department can convince him that the programs are critical for the safety and protection of the United States, he may reconsider.

"What I'm calling for is a dialogue," he said.

--Compiled by Annie Schleicher for NewsHour Extra

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