NUCLEAR WEAPONS

DOD Assessed the Need for Each Leg of the Strategic Triad and Considered Other Reductions to Nuclear Forces

What GAO Found

The Department of Defense (DOD) assessed the need for each leg of the strategic triad in support of the 2010 Nuclear Posture Review and considered other reductions to nuclear forces in subsequent reviews. The department identified advantages of each leg of the triad and concluded that retaining all three would help maintain strategic deterrence and stability. The advantages DOD identified include the survivability of the sea-based leg, the intercontinental ballistic missiles’ contribution to stability, and the ability of the nuclear-capable bombers to visibly forward deploy. The 2010 Nuclear Posture Review Report— and DOD officials also told GAO—that the administration has considered various options for the U.S. nuclear force structure, including options in which DOD would eliminate one leg of the triad. For example, Strategic Command, Air Force, and Navy officials told GAO that they had analyzed alternative strategic force structures in preparation for the 2010 Nuclear Posture Review. DOD officials also told GAO that the department had assessed nuclear force reductions as part of reviews conducted after the Nuclear Posture Review, including during the development of the President’s 2013 nuclear employment guidance, the 2013 Strategic Choices Management Review, and DOD’s 2014 plan to implement the New Strategic Arms Reduction Treaty (New START) with Russia. The figure shows DOD’s current planned strategic force structure for implementing New START, including the number of delivery vehicles that would be retained for each leg of the triad.

DOD’s Current Planned Strategic Force Structure for Implementing the New Strategic Arms Reduction Treaty, Grouped by the Three Legs of the Strategic Triad

Sea-based strategic deterrent
240 submarine-launched ballistic missiles (deployed strategic delivery vehicle), which are carried on ballistic missile submarines

Ground-based strategic deterrent
400 intercontinental ballistic missiles (deployed strategic delivery vehicle)

Airborne strategic deterrent
60 heavy bombers (deployed strategic delivery vehicle)

Source: GAO analysis of Department of Defense documents. | GAO-16-740

This is a public version of a classified report GAO issued in May 2016. It excludes classified information on warhead levels, the specific advantages of each leg of the triad, and some of the analyses of alternatives that were considered.