

# Has the Navy Nailed Nuclear Funding?

As the Air Force's B-21 bomber program gets underway, service leaders are making it clear they want the same treatment the Navy is receiving for its effort to replace its Ohio-class ballistic missile submarines.

In recent remarks to the media and on Capitol Hill, Air Force Secretary Deborah Lee James has suggested a separate Defense Department-wide deterrence account set up to pay for the Ohio-class replacement should be available for the B-21 and efforts to modernize USAF's intercontinental ballistic missiles.

"Well, certainly, if there is to be a fund for nuclear modernization, it seems to me appropriate that it be for all three legs of the triad and not just for one leg of the triad," James told reporters at the Pentagon on March 7. "So if indeed that is the approach that is selected, it seems to me that ought to be a joint fund."

The Navy has long argued that the cost of its next ballistic missile submarine would devastate other shipbuilding efforts, if the service was forced to pay for the national strategic program out of hide. The submarine program comes with a \$139 billion price tag, with annual costs expected to spike when construction begins in 2021.

In response to the Navy's concerns, Congress created the National Sea-Based Deterrence Fund in the Fiscal 2015 defense authorization law and expanded that account's authorities in last year's authorization measure. But appropriators, who actually dole out the cash, have resisted the special funding stream, declining in the Fiscal 2016 omnibus spending package to shift money into the fund.

Senate Appropriations Chairman Thad Cochran, (R-Miss.), has already signaled he is happy the Navy's Fiscal 2017 request for the program, which totals \$1.9 billion, keeps the funding within the service's own accounts. "We welcome the inclusion of full funding for the Ohio-class replacement program within the Navy's regular budget request from Fiscal Year 2017 through Fiscal Year 2021," he said.

But the fund continues to enjoy wide support, particularly on the House Armed Services Committee.

The Air Force, which manages two of the three legs of the triad, wants to make sure lawmakers don't forget about USAF's

strategic nuclear programs, which also come with steep price tags.

Critics of the fund, like Cochran, have worried about just that. To validate the need for the account, the Navy has billed its Ohio-class replacement effort as a "national asset," not a service priority—and there's nothing stopping the Air Force from doing the same for its strategic bomber.

Senate Armed Services Chairman John McCain, who signed off on last year's defense bill expanding the account's authorities, sees the slippery slope this extra-service fund creates.

"We want the discussion [about the Ohio-class replacement] to be at a national level, but I'm not sure every new weapons system then wouldn't warrant the same kind of special treatment and that's the dilemma here," the Arizona Republican said March 15.

The next day, across the Capitol, James reiterated her March 7 comments during testimony before House lawmakers, attempting to stake a service claim to the deterrence account.

"I am not fully familiar with the strategic deterrence fund that you all have referenced here," she said. "But if that is a strategic deterrence fund, which would help or benefit one leg of the triad, I would ask for consideration that all the legs of the triad be included in such an approach."

But while the fund gives the services a larger pool of money—the entirety of the Defense Department budget—to draw money from, it does not completely solve the funding program for nuclear modernization efforts, which will collectively consume a growing share of the Pentagon's capped budget.

While the account may protect individual programs, or at least allow the department to spread the pain across the military, the Pentagon still must ultimately adhere to those spending caps. So, the question is: How much pain is the Pentagon willing to inflict on its other accounts and priorities to maintain and modernize the triad?

"This is a much larger discussion than any particular service. It has to be the Department of Defense. It's a congressional, it's a White House discussion," Air Force Chief of Staff Gen. Mark A. Welsh III said March 16. "Because we need an answer pretty quickly or we're going to spend money toward a lot of programs that we ... can't complete if we don't fund them down the road."

For the time being, however, the Air Force must continue to plan for the B-21, an eventual Minuteman III ICBM replacement, and the next generation Long-Range Standoff (LRSO) cruise missile within traditional spending accounts. ✦

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*Will the Ohio-class nuclear sub replacement slip through a funding loophole?*