Nuclear Sea-Launched Cruise Missile (SLCM-N): Unneeded, Unwanted, Unwise

The Biden administration’s Nuclear Posture Review (NPR), complete in classified form but yet to be publicly released, takes the wise step of eliminating a proposed new nuclear-armed sea-launched cruise missile (SLCM-N), one that is not needed for US security and that will cost tens of billions of dollars.

The SLCM-N was initiated by the Trump administration in its 2018 Nuclear Posture Review, along with another new weapon, a low-yield W76-2 warhead on submarine-launched ballistic missiles. As a candidate, President Biden called such weapons a “bad idea,” and the 2020 Democratic Party Platform declared them “unnecessary, wasteful, and indefensible.” Navy Secretary Carlos Del Toro said in testimony before the Senate Armed Services Committee “I believe we should zero out the SLCM line. I believe the President has all the tools in his toolkit necessarily [sic] to deter and deal with the threat of a tactical nuclear missile.”

The Navy’s FY23 budget request eliminates funding for the weapon, calling it “cost prohibitive” and saying that the planned schedule “would have delivered capability late to need.” This saves almost $200 million in FY23, $2 billion in the next five years, and more than $30 billion over the life of the program.

China, the War in Ukraine Should Not Cause a Change in Plans

China’s nuclear expansion and Russia’s war on Ukraine has led some military officials to support the SLCM-N. For example, Head of Strategic Command Admiral Charles Richard sent a letter to Congress in April saying that “[t]he current situation in Ukraine and China’s nuclear trajectory convinces me a deterrence and assurance gap exists.” In response to questions from members of Congress, Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff General Mark Milley also expressed support for the program because, he said, the President “deserves to have multiple options.” However, Milley also noted that the United States already has “lots of options and we have a significant nuclear capability.” And Secretary of Defense Lloyd Austin said that SLCM-N has value, but “the marginal capability that this provides is far outweighed by the cost.”

In May 2022 testimony to the House Armed Services Committee, Chief of Naval Operations Admiral Michael Gilday cited a cost of $31 billion, adding that he was “not convinced yet” that an investment of this size was warranted given other US capabilities. In testimony, Gilday said that SLCM-N “has been offered as a single point solution” to fill what he called a “gap” created by Russia’s tactical nuclear capability, but “there are other [solutions] to think about.”

The SLCM-N Is Unneeded

The United States has not deployed a nuclear-armed sea-launched cruise missile since 1991, when President George H.W. Bush withdrew from service the nuclear Tomahawk Land Attack Missile (TLAM-N). The Obama administration’s 2010 Nuclear Posture Review officially retired it, noting that the cruise missile “serves a redundant purpose in the U.S. nuclear stockpile,” and that “the deterrence and assurance roles of TLAM-N can be adequately substituted.
by...other means.” The Trump administration’s 2018 Nuclear Posture Review created a new nuclear sea-launched cruise missile program, citing a need to “provide a needed non-strategic regional presence” in Europe and Asia and contribute “to deterrence and assurance of allies, especially in Asia.” However, the US already has a range of nuclear options, including the B61 gravity bomb, an air-launched cruise missile, and the new low-yield W76-2 warhead.

The SLCM-N Is Unwanted

In testimony to the House Armed Services Committee on the Navy’s FY23 budget request, Adm. Gilday said moving forward with the program would come at a cost to the Navy’s other missions. He said that “having served on a nuclear capable surface ship in the late 1980s, that mission does not come without a cost. There is a significant amount of attention that has to be paid to any platform that carries that -- that type of weapon. In terms of training, in terms of sustainability, in terms of reliability, in terms of the force’s readiness to be able to use -- to be able to conduct that mission.”

Press reports indicate Navy leaders told members of Congress the program would cause problems in terms of budget and operations. The Navy already faces a budgetary crunch as the new class of ballistic missile submarines clash with its desire to expand its conventional fleet.

It could also cause complications with allies, as countries like Japan and New Zealand have banned ships carrying nuclear weapons from their ports and other allies have historically registered reluctance to host ships that might have nuclear weapons aboard.

The SLCM-N Is Unwise

Tactical nuclear weapons like the SLCM-N are destabilizing because their options for reduced explosive yield can lower the threshold for use, making nuclear war more likely. It would also create a complicated problem for potential adversaries, one that could backfire against the United States. With no way to discriminate before impact whether the cruise missile was nuclear or conventional, countries like Russia could assume the worst, potentially leading to a nuclear response.

In addition, the SLCM-N will require a new nuclear warhead, a variation of the W80-4 warhead being developed for a new air-launched cruise missile. That demand will further strain the over-stressed National Nuclear Security Administration (NNSA), which already has four major nuclear weapons under development, plus a mandate to produce 80 plutonium pits by 2030, a goal the NNSA admits will not be achievable.

Congress should not be swayed by dangerous arguments that the US needs yet another nuclear weapon. The current nuclear arsenal is more than sufficient and adding more tactical nuclear missiles to the mix would only increase the risk that they might be used.

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