

## The US Navy's Nuclear Posture: Fit for Purpose

By

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With any conflict over Taiwan certain to depend heavily on the US Navy, it is time for the Navy to reassess its nuclear capabilities so that it can not only meet the deterrence requirements of the twenty-first century but employ the right nuclear weapons in a future conflict. Currently, the Navy's contribution to nuclear deterrence resides in its ballistic missile submarine fleet, which carries the Trident D5 submarine-launched ballistic missile (SLBM). This is simply too limited of a nuclear capability.

During the Cold War, the Navy contributed significantly more to the nuclear arsenal. The current limitation is traced back to the George H. W. Bush administration's response to the successful outcome of the Cold War. President Bush recognized that with the end of the Cold War the United States [needed to draw down](#) its nuclear forces as the Soviet threat receded into history. Pushing for more arms control and assurance measures to allow for the new world order to take shape made strategic sense.

The Soviets were no longer a threat, the Chinese did not have sufficient capability to harm the United States, and there was no other rising nuclear power. Thus, the Bush administration eliminated all tactical nuclear forces from the Navy's inventory. However, today's geopolitical realities are very different.

### The Current Challenge

The Trump administration recognized the deficiency in nuclear strategy and capability. Trump both sought to develop the nuclear-capable sea-launched cruise missiles (SLCM-N) and fielded the W76-2 low-yield warhead for the Trident D5. Whether the W76-2 is a tactical weapon or a low-yield strategic weapon is debatable, but its purpose was to offer an alternative to the limited capability of Europe-based nuclear-armed dual-capable fighter aircraft.

The 2018 [Nuclear Posture Review](#) stated that the administration's goal with the SLCM-N was to diversify nuclear delivery platforms that would not rely on allied support and hedge against any so-called breakout scenarios by adversaries, which is exactly what the Chinese began by the end of the Trump administration. Recognizing the risks from emerging threats and additional nuclear powers, President Trump's SLCM-N proposal offered a credible means to deter multiple hostile nations while continuing to provide assurances to allies and partners.

Indeed, with China and Russia modernizing their strategic deterrent and seeking unique delivery means that undermine arms control agreements and North Korea making significant gains in its nuclear arsenal, it now makes strategic sense for the Biden administration to not only pursue SLCM-N, but also additional nuclear capabilities—to prevent conflict.

There are many in the arms control community that object to adding any new systems. Some argue that new weapons would lower the threshold for using nuclear weapons, particularly if they are considered theater or tactical nuclear weapons. They argue such a move turns deterrence into warfighting. The Congressional Research Service also [claims](#) that the Navy would sacrifice conventional capability and introduce unneeded friction into ally operations and cooperation.

Yet there are other issues that nuclear strategists should consider. Since the elder Bush eliminated tactical nuclear weapons from the Navy's arsenal, the surface fleet and naval air forces do not possess the knowledge or means to deploy nuclear weapons in the event of a conflict where it becomes a necessity. Such a requirement generates significant need for training and certification of surface combatants and air assets. Nuclear weapons handling, storage, security, and employment are all part of the equation. Today, the Department of Defense and the Navy lack a feasible and suitable plan to reintroduce tactical nuclear weapons into the surface fleet and among assets, if required, which escalation over Taiwan could generate. With the Biden administration scrapping the SLCM-N in the 2022 [Nuclear Posture Review](#), it appears that the status quo for the Navy will see no expansion of the sea leg.

However, it is time for the United States and the Navy to take a hard look at the capabilities required to both deter and, if necessary, defeat the Chinese in a Pacific conflict. Russia, China, North Korea, and Iran are all growing increasingly belligerent and seeking to change the American-led world order to one that better suits their authoritarian goals. This is nothing new.

Nuclear weapons are becoming the go-to means to deter the United States and America's allies. To address the challenges discussed, reintroducing tactical nuclear weapons into the Navy makes strategic sense. This is not to "mirror" the adversary, but to give decision-makers more options for both deterrence and warfighting. A good start is to field SLCM-N in the Navy arsenal, but this is not the only system nuclear strategists should consider.

## Additional Recommendations

Two additional recommendations are worth noting. First, as the [B61-12](#) and [B61-13](#) come available, returning a fighter-delivered gravity bomb to naval air wings is worth examination. Given their variable yield and short range, they have the ability to meet specific targeting needs in naval warfare. The very fact that they are deployed to the fleet may also prove a sufficient deterrent to prevent conflict in the first place.

Second, the long-range stand-off (LRSO) cruise missile may also be useful for deployment on surface ships. These weapons may also have a similar effect in convincing an adversary that the complexity of the deterrence calculation, and its failure, is not worth the risk.

As Paul Giarra writes, the Cold War Navy's deployment of nuclear weapons across the fleet had a "[sobering effect](#)" on the Soviets. That effect deterred conflict. It is time to apply the lessons of the Navy's past experience to the growing Chinese naval threat. It may aid in deterring conflict over Taiwan.

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