

## Re-Establishing Non-Strategic Nuclear Capabilities in the United States Navy

By

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In an era marked by escalating tensions, the concept of nuclear deterrence still holds profound significance and elicits multifaceted discussion and debate. One proposition in the defense community is the reintroduction of a non-strategic nuclear capability within the United States Navy, by way of the sea-launched cruise missile-nuclear (SLCM-N). What is missing in the debate is an in-depth analysis from a tactical standpoint, focusing on the capabilities, costs, and communication strategies pertinent to such a proposition.

### Capabilities Assessment

The possible introduction of SLCM-N to the attack submarine fleet creates an imperative that requires assessing the weapon's efficiency in enhancing the United States' ability to both deter an adversary and defeat it, if necessary. From a tactical standpoint, the deployment of SLCM-N offers enhanced flexibility and responsiveness, enabling targeted precision strikes against key adversary assets.

Additionally, the versatility of SLCM-N enables credible deterrence across a spectrum of threats, bolstering the United States' strategic resilience in an increasingly volatile geopolitical environment. By utilizing and retrofitting existing or in-process systems, it is possible to make SLCM-N a variable-yield, stealthy, and surgically precise tactical-/battlefield-employable nuclear system. Furthermore, the necessity for a more regionally targeted nuclear weapon capability is necessary, now more than ever, to deter aggression in both EUCOM and INDOPACOM theaters and potentially provide greater assurance to partners and allies.

### Cost Implications

A key focal point in deliberations surrounding the re-establishment of non-strategic nuclear capabilities is an evaluation of the associated costs—financially and politically. While the deployment of SLCM-N entails large financial investments, its strategic value in offsetting deterrence capabilities warrants consideration. It is important to ensure the cost efficiency of SLCM-N deployment without compromising critical Navy readiness and modernization initiatives. Despite the 2022 *Nuclear Posture Review* calling for the cancellation of the SLCM-N program, Congress expressed its consternation with that decision by funding the program anyway.

This is key to understanding some of the nuances of shared power within the federal government. Additionally, the geopolitical cost implications must be addressed as well. Adding new capabilities to the American arsenal could drive significant costs for arms control globally. Both near-peer and pacing competitors could see this as an expression of aggression and escalation. This could increase tensions surrounding global arms control and nonproliferation. However, continuing to ignore pacing challenges could potentially threaten arms control and the credibility of ally assurance.

## Communication Strategy

Effective communication lies at the heart of strategic decision-making, particularly concerning sensitive topics such as nuclear deterrence. Transparent communication that emphasizes the importance of clarity between military leadership, policymakers, and the public regarding the rationale and implications of reestablishing non-strategic nuclear capabilities is critical. Effective communication also includes proactive engagement with international partners and allies, which is important in fostering cohesion and avoiding misperceptions in a world of continuously evolving threats. Proper messaging to adversaries is equally vital to ensuring the efficacy of adding a new capability to the toolbox. The delicate nature of communication must not be overlooked. American leaders must place this facet of military strategy at the forefront of their minds when addressing not only nuclear but also any decision that is likely to have second- and third-order effects whether intentional or unintentional. Due to the historic nature of American involvement in conflict around the world, the ability to communicate effectively on the world stage is imperative to ensuring the success of this task.

## Conclusion

The re-establishment of a non-strategic nuclear capability within the US Navy, bringing SLCM-N to the fleet, represents a nuanced proposition that warrants meticulous scrutiny from a tactical perspective. Keeping an eye on the capability provided, system and modification cost, and a broader communication strategy is essential for informed decision-making when navigating such a complex topic. Nuclear weapon experts Robert Soofer and Walter Slocomb write, “The House and Senate appropriations committees have not provided adequate funding for the nuclear-armed sea-launched cruise missile (SLCM-N). This is a mistake. The United States needs this capability to deter Russia, China, and North Korea, and to assure its allies.”

SLCM-N enhances deterrence by providing the United States with a flexible and credible deterrent against nuclear-armed adversaries. Fielding an additional nuclear response option also improves allied assurance. A breadth of nuclear capabilities, including sea-launched cruise missiles, gives the American nuclear arsenal the depth required for adversaries that are growing their own capabilities. This aids in ensuring deterrence holds, while reaffirming American commitment to ally security.

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