

Why Funding for the SLCM Nuclear Warhead Should Be Deleted

Introduction: In 1991, in response to the ongoing collapse of the Soviet Union, President George H. Bush ordered the withdrawal of all nuclear-armed sea-launched cruise missiles (SLCMs) from U.S. surface ships and submarines. In 2018 President Trump’s Nuclear Posture Review proposed to redeploy SLCMs on Virginia-class attack submarines, saying they would provide the United States with “a needed non-strategic regional presence” that would address “the increasing need for flexible and low-yield options.”¹ Congress subsequently approved \$15.2 million in FY 2022 funding for the Navy’s new cruise missile and nuclear warhead.

In March 2022 President Biden transmitted a new classified Nuclear Posture Review to Congress that reportedly canceled the Sea-Launched Cruise Missile. In parallel, his proposed FY 2023 budget for the National Nuclear Security Administration (NNSA) has no funding for the SLCM nuclear warhead. This has prompted some congressional pushback, with one suggested compromise being continuing modest research funding. But as a Congressional Research Service analysis put it: “The Navy indicated that the program was “cost prohibitive and the acquisition schedule would have delivered capability late to need.”²

Funding for the SLCM in FY 2023 should be deleted in its entirety because:

- Federal programs that receive any funding, however small at the beginning, have a strong tendency to mushroom over time. As an overarching example, SLCM is just one relatively small piece of the current nuclear weapons “modernization” program. In 2010 President Obama agreed to a relatively modest amount of modernization funding to help secure Senate ratification of the New Strategic Arms Reduction Treaty. That cost to operate, sustain and modernize the U.S.’ nuclear weapons stockpile has since metastasized to at least \$1.2 trillion over 30 years³ and is still growing. Specific to the SLCM, it is unfortunately a partisan issue. It would be best to delete the program now, which may be impossible later should Republicans win control of Congress.
- The Navy doesn’t want the SLCM. Navy Secretary Carlos Del Toro recently testified to Congress, “I believe that we should zero out the SLCM line.” Referring to other U.S. nuclear weapons, Del Toro added “the president has all the tools in his tool kit necessary to deter and deal with the threat.”⁴

In contrast, Joint Chiefs of Staff Chairman Mark Milley testified to the House Armed Services Committee on May 5 that “My position on [the SLCM] has not changed. My general view is that this president or any president deserves to have multiple options to deal with national security situations.”⁵ But before that Defense Secretary Lloyd Austin told Congress, “The marginal capability that [the nuclear SLCM] provides is far outweighed by the cost.” Milley later acknowledged the President has “lots of options and we have a significant nuclear capability.”

- According to the NNSA the cost of the SLCM nuclear warhead will be \$3.2 billion.⁶ This is relatively low cost for NNSA, likely indicating that it can be designed and built somewhat quickly, with a First Production Unit currently planned for FY 2029. But the modest costs for the SLCM nuclear warhead are not the big operational costs for the Navy, nor are all of those costs purely monetary. As the chair of the House Strategic Forces Subcommittee recently put it, “[D]eveloping a new SLCM warhead would further strain a National Nuclear Security

Administration complex that is already facing significant challenges. Tasking Virginia-class submarines to take on a nuclear mission would be extremely costly and burdensome—we need those platforms fully focused on their critical conventional missions.”⁷ Those costs include the necessary training of crews and strict security protocols for nuclear warheads which would divert resources from the attack submarines’ conventional missions.

- Concerning presidential options, the United States already has overwhelming nuclear-armed cruise missile and non-strategic (i.e., tactical or battlefield nuclear weapons) capabilities. Submarines are prized for their stealthiness and undetectability. Within the last few years the United States deployed low-yield W76-2s on strategic submarines. For the air leg of the triad, the NNSA is currently ramping up production of the B61-12, the world’s first nuclear smart bomb, to be delivered by the stealthy F-35 and B-21 Raiders. The agency is also ramping up production of the W80-4 nuclear warhead for the Long-Range Stand-Off weapon to be delivered by air launched cruise missiles from B-52s up to 1,500 miles from their targets.
- NNSA’s ability to successfully execute its workload is also a major issue. Concerning work on warheads, there are the B61-12 and W80-4 Life Extension Programs, the W88 “Alteration,” the W87-1 “Modification” and a completely new design in the W93, all underway or planned for the next two decades.⁸ The B61-12 LEP and W88 Alteration have already faced two-year delays and ~\$750 million in additional costs. Congressional sources have indicated that the W80-4 Life Extension Program is also delayed, which a pending report is expected to verify. To add to this, there is a huge effort to produce at least 80 plutonium pit bomb cores per year by 2030, which is already significantly delayed and experiencing escalating costs. Further, the NNSA and its preceding Department of Energy Defense Programs have been on the Government Accountability Office’s High Risk List for project mismanagement since its inception in 1991. Adding yet another arguably unneeded warhead to NNSA’s workload is not fiscally prudent.

Conclusion: Funding for the Sea-Launched Cruise Missile nuclear warhead should be entirely deleted for FY 2023 because the President has a number of other nuclear weapons options, it would detract from attack submarines’ conventional missions and it is questionable that NNSA can successfully execute its overly ambitious planned workload. In addition, possible future Republican control of Congress would likely expand the program. Therefore, the Sea-Launched Cruise Missile nuclear warhead should be deleted now.

This fact sheet is available at <https://nukewatch.org/delete-slcm-funding/>

¹ Nuclear Posture Review, 2018, page 55, <https://media.defense.gov/2018/Feb/02/2001872886/-1/-1/1/2018-NUCLEAR-POSTURE-REVIEW-FINAL-REPORT.PDF>

² *Nuclear-Armed Sea-Launched Cruise Missile (SLCM-N)*, April 25, 2022, <https://crsreports.congress.gov>

³ *Approaches for Managing the Costs of U.S. Nuclear Forces, 2017 to 2046*, Congressional Budget Office, October 2017, <https://www.cbo.gov/publication/53211>

⁴ *Senate Armed Services Committee Holds Hearing on the Fiscal Year 2023 Navy Budget Request*, U.S. Navy Press office, May 12, 2022, <https://www.navy.mil/Press-Office/Testimony/display-testimony/Article/3030778/senate-armed-services-committee-holds-hearing-on-the-fiscal-year-2023-navy-budg/>

⁵ Testimony before the House Armed Services Committee, April 5, 2022, <https://armedservices.house.gov/hearings?ID=9165C8E2-53A6-4A45-8BB7-CFEA21CF021F>

⁶ NNSA FY 2022 Stockpile Stewardship and Management Plan, page 8-31, <https://www.energy.gov/nnsa/articles/stockpile-stewardship-and-management-plan-ssmp> However, the NNSA notes, “Specific warhead choices, including deviation from W80-4 Alteration, could drive significant development/qualification costs.” Ibid., page 8-30.

⁷ Opening Statement (As Prepared) Chairman Jim Cooper, Subcommittee on Strategic Forces Hearing, “*Fiscal Year 2023 Budget for Nuclear Forces and Atomic Energy Defense Activities*”, May 17, 2022

⁸ See Figure 2–3. *DOE/NNSA warhead activities*, NNSA FY 2022 Stockpile Stewardship and Management Plan, page 2-10, <https://www.energy.gov/nnsa/articles/stockpile-stewardship-and-management-plan-ssmp>