

Is a New Nuclear Cruise Missile Necessary?

Background

The U.S. nuclear arsenal, which features a triad of nuclear weapons on bombers, land-based ballistic missiles, and submarines, will be going through an extensive and expensive modernization plan costing up to [\\$1 trillion](#) over the next three decades. The Pentagon plans to update all three legs of the triad by building new nuclear submarines, new penetrating stealth bombers, new nuclear gravity bombs and cruise missiles, and a new or refurbished intercontinental ballistic missile. Many experts worry that these modernization plans are excessive and unaffordable. Moreover, this rebuild could [siphon funds](#) from conventional forces needed to confront ISIL and maintain other strategic priorities.

New Cruise Missile?

As part of this plan, the Pentagon plans to build between 1,000-1,100 new air-launched cruise missiles to replace the current model, which will reach the end of its operational life around 2030. An air-launched cruise missile is a guided missile fired from an airplane and can travel long distances. The new cruise missile, known as the Long-Range Standoff (LRSO), is expected to cost between \$20 and \$30 billion dollars.

Many nuclear policy experts question the necessity of building a new nuclear cruise missile for the bomber leg of the triad. Most notably, former Secretary of Defense William Perry (who helped develop the current air-launched cruise missile during his time at the Pentagon) and former Assistant Secretary of Defense Andrew Weber [penned an op-ed](#) urging the president to cancel the program, deeming the weapon both unnecessary and inherently destabilizing.

Unnecessary

A new cruise missile is unnecessary to maintain a credible nuclear deterrent, and would siphon funding from critical weapons acquisition plans.

- Without the nuclear cruise missile, the United States still maintains a triad of thousands of nuclear weapons on ballistic missile submarines, intercontinental ballistic missiles, and bombers that carry nuclear gravity bombs.
- The new stealth bomber, which is designated to enter service in 2025, will be designed to penetrate air defenses. Building a new penetrating stealth missile on a new penetrating stealth bomber is a [redundancy for a redundancy](#).
- The Air Force has conventional non-nuclear standoff capabilities, like the [JASSM-ER cruise missile](#) produced in 2014, which are highly effective at destroying targets from outside contested airspace.

Destabilizing

A new nuclear cruise missile could amplify the risk of nuclear escalation.

- Deploying a new cruise missile increases the risk of miscalculation and unintended escalation, since other countries cannot determine if a launched missile is conventional or nuclear.
- While unnecessary for deterrence, the nuclear cruise missile is seen by some proponents as a tool for “limited” nuclear war. The world has avoided a nuclear war for 70 years because national leaders, regardless of ideology, recognize that any use of a nuclear weapon will likely lead to nuclear escalation that is impossible to control. The bright line between conventional and nuclear war should be assiduously maintained.
- The proliferation of nuclear cruise missile technology to other countries, like China, could increase the likelihood of a future nuclear exchange. Instead of motivating a spread of this technology, the US could take a leadership role in negotiating a global ban on nuclear cruise missiles.

The Bottom Line

Canceling the new nuclear cruise missile will relieve budgetary pressure on other modernization priorities and decrease the likelihood of an unintended nuclear exchange, while still leaving the United States with a highly credible nuclear deterrent.