

Low-Yield Trident D5 Warhead: Dangerous, Unnecessary, and Destabilizing

Congress should deny authorization and appropriations for production and deployment for the Trump Administration's request for a new, modified "low-yield" warhead for the Trident D5 submarine-launched ballistic missile. Specifically, Congress should prohibit fielding and zero the NNSA budget request of \$10 million and the DoD budget request of \$25.7 million (\$19.6M for W76-2 and \$6.1M for responsive targeting effort). It should also require a plan for removing the W76-2 from the stockpile.

The Administration argues that the United States has a "gap" in our deterrence requirements that only a low-yield D5 can fill. The truth is that a low-yield D5 is a solution in search of a problem.

A Low-Yield D5 is Unnecessary

The Administration has not sufficiently explained why existing multi-billion dollar conventional and nuclear capabilities no longer deter Russia.

The United States has the most capable and sophisticated conventional and nuclear arsenal in the world. It already has the ability to respond to the limited use of nuclear weapons in multiple ways, and currently possesses approximately [1,000 warheads](#) with low-yield options in the air-leg of the Triad. In fact, Congress and the last two Administrations have already spent billions towards a \$150 billion collection of programs specifically devoted to ensuring these low-yield capabilities can continue to penetrate the most advanced air defenses. Massive investments have been and will continue to be made on a new, stealthy bomber capable of penetrating enemy air defenses (the B-21 Raider) armed with a new, stealthy nuclear cruise missile capable of penetrating enemy air defenses (the Long Range Standoff Weapon, or LRSO) and an updated, [highly accurate](#) nuclear gravity bomb (the B61-12).

The Administration argues that Russia has a supposed doctrine of "escalate-to-deescalate," whereby Russia would employ nuclear weapons on a limited basis to end a conventional conflict with NATO. The evidence for this doctrine is [debatable at best](#). But if current and planned air-launched options cannot deter or respond to Russian actions, why are taxpayers being asked to spend billions of dollars on these systems?

A Low-Yield D5 Increases the Chances of Nuclear Miscalculation

The Administration has been dangerously unclear about how they would employ a low-yield D5.

U.S. ballistic missile submarines currently carry missiles armed with multiple, high-yield warheads. When a missile is launched, an adversary would have no way of knowing whether an incoming missile was armed with a low-yield warhead or many high-yield warheads. An adversary would likely respond to the worst-case scenario – increasing the risk of unintended nuclear escalation. Any non-test launch of a Trident ballistic missile – whether for strategic or tactical use – risks triggering further and uncontrollable escalation.

Congress Has Already Rejected a Non-Nuclear D5

Bipartisan opposition killed a George W. Bush Administration proposal for a [conventional Trident warhead](#) to supplement existing Trident nuclear options.

Congress was rightly concerned about the inability of nuclear-armed adversaries to determine whether a conventionally-armed ballistic missile launched from a U.S. submarine was conventional or nuclear. With a low-yield D5, the chances of miscalculation remain and the likelihood of escalation increases dramatically. Congress should employ the same logic it used to reject the conventional Trident to reject the low-yield D5.

Former Military Leaders and Officials on Low-Yield Nuclear Options

“The U.S... continues to upgrade its arsenal and is beginning to talk about using sea-launched missiles—with which the target nation has a difficult time differentiating between a conventional and nuclear attack—tactical nuclear weapons. This is a destabilizing mistake.”

- [James Stavridis](#), retired U.S. Navy Admiral, former NATO Supreme Allied Commander

“The idea of a low-yield nuclear weapon is kind of a mirage. It is a nuclear weapon. It has all kinds of aspects to it... [it] invites escalation. So my own opinion is I hate to see people start figuring out how they can use nuclear weapons. That is what it amounts to, because their use is so potentially devastating. You get an escalation going and a nuclear exchange going, and it can be ruinous to the world very easily.”

- [Dr. George Shultz](#), former Secretary of State (Reagan Administration)

“Signaling that a low-yield weapon would be used to respond to low-yield weapon use might persuade Russia to lower the nuclear threshold, thus risking nuclear war-fighting. President Ronald Reagan cautioned against this in 1984 when he said, “A nuclear war cannot be won and must never be fought. The only value in our two nations possessing nuclear weapons is to make sure they will never be used.”

- [Madelyn Creedon](#), former Principal Deputy Administrator of NNSA and Assistant Secretary of Defense for Global Strategic Affairs (Obama Administration)

“It is unclear how Moscow would know it is being targeted with a small [submarine-launched ballistic missile] warhead, since the high yield version would also fly on the same D-5 Trident missile. Use of the small nuclear variant could easily lead to an all-out nuclear exchange since Moscow would perceive an incoming strategic missile attack and respond accordingly.”

- [Andy Weber](#), former Assistant Secretary of Defense for Nuclear, Chemical & Biological Defense Programs (Obama Administration)

“Producing new small-yield nuclear weapons could provoke an arms race in that realm—even though the United States already possesses 1,000 low-yield nuclear weapons, including the B-61 bomb and an air-launched cruise missile that can deliver yields between 0.3 to 170 kilotons.”

- [Dr. Lawrence Korb](#), former Assistant Secretary of Defense for Manpower, Reserve Affairs, Installations, and Logistics (Reagan Administration)

“A nuclear weapon is a nuclear weapon. You can’t control it.”

- [Richard Armitage](#), former Deputy Secretary of State (George W. Bush Administration)