

Nuclear Sea-Launched Cruise Missiles Are Wasteful

The Biden administration has [decided](#) against developing a new nuclear-armed sea-launched cruise missile (SLCM-N) and its associated warhead. In FY23 budget documents, the Navy [stated](#) that “the program was cost prohibitive and the acquisition schedule would have delivered capability late to need.” Congress should fully support the President’s request to eliminate funding for this dangerous, unnecessary and wasteful Trump-era system.

Background

In 1991, President George H.W. Bush ordered all nuclear-armed Tomahawk Land Attack Missiles, a kind of SLCM-N, removed from U.S. submarines and placed in storage. In 2010, the Obama administration declared the missiles a redundant capability and retired them. The Trump administration’s 2018 Nuclear Posture Review called for the development of a new SLCM-N to fill a theoretical gap in the U.S. arsenal for a low-yield nuclear response. The Congressional Budget Office [estimates](#) a new SLCM-N will cost at least \$10 billion through 2031. That total does not include production costs after 2031, retrofitting submarines and surface ships to carry the weapon, or other operational or security costs.

Unwanted, Costly and Redundant

A new SLCM-N is a costly solution to a nonexistent problem. It is [not necessary](#) for deterrence, and pursuing such a program would be an expensive exercise that would do little to enhance U.S. security.

- *SLCM-Ns weaken the U.S. Navy’s conventional warfighting duties.* Arming U.S. surface or attack submarine fleets with SLCM-Ns means less space for conventional weaponry, weakening U.S. conventional capabilities and potentially leaving even fewer ships available for the Navy’s already overstretched mission set. It would also either bring nuclear weapons back to states that don’t currently house them, or force Navy ships to go out of their way to pick them up before deployment. Some U.S. allies like Japan and New Zealand also prohibit nuclear-armed vessels from docking at their ports or engaging in joint training exercises, presenting additional diplomatic challenges and resupply issues.
- *The United States already has [plenty of lower-yield nuclear options](#).* The B61 gravity bomb, the W80-equipped air-launched cruise missile, and the W76-2 sea-launched ballistic missile are all low-yield capabilities already existing in the arsenal. The United States can meet adversaries at any escalation level with its current conventional and nuclear means. Adding a new SLCM-N would be a costly hedge built on an existing hedge.
- *SLCM-Ns introduce dangerous ambiguity between conventional and nuclear warfare.* It is realistically impossible to tell if a cruise missile carries a conventional or nuclear warhead, as both share the same radar profile, and would be launched from the same submarine or destroyer platforms. If the U.S. deploys nuclear-capable SLCMs, its adversaries could assume any SLCM the U.S. launches is nuclear until proven otherwise. This problem is exacerbated by how often cruise missiles are used in war — the United States alone has launched [at least 2,200 cruise missiles](#) since 1991. In a conflict with Russia or China, SLCM-Ns could constrain U.S. conventional warfighting abilities and increase the chance of an accidental nuclear war.