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Full Steam Ahead on the SLCM-N

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Introduction

Mark Twain reportedly said, “It ain’t what you don’t know that gets you into trouble, it’s what you know for sure that just ain’t so.”¹ And commentaries opposing the equipping of surface naval ships with nuclear sea-launched cruise missiles, including a recent article by former Obama Administration official Andrew Weber,² are perfect examples. They demonstrate that inaccurate assumptions, faulty logic, and a misreading of history produce bad policy.

Three Fallacies

Weber attacks President Trump’s decision to deploy a new nuclear cruise missile (SLCM-N) on surface ships such as the proposed new “Trump-class battleship”³ for three main reasons – all of which are wrong. First, he asserts that if an adversary uses such smaller “tactical” nuclear weapons the United States should not threaten a limited nuclear response in kind but rather an “overwhelming retaliation” using its strategic forces.⁴ It is difficult to think of a more escalatory response that could lead to massive societal destruction, or one that is less likely to be seen as credible by America’s enemies. Would the United States seriously unleash Armageddon in response to the limited use by an opponent of a tactical nuclear weapon? How credible would such a threat be? This can hardly be considered stabilizing. Moreover, such an approach flies



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in the face of Just War and Law of Armed Conflict principles that call for minimizing unnecessary and inadvertent destruction in the event of conflict.⁵

Second, he contends that smaller tactical nuclear weapons make nuclear use more likely. He says, “We have history to learn from...,”⁶ but history suggests otherwise. During the Cold War, the United States relied heavily on tactical nuclear weapons in Europe to offset the Soviet Union’s superior conventional forces; yet that did not make nuclear war more likely. In fact, it helped successfully deter a Soviet invasion of Western Europe, which would likely have escalated to nuclear war. In fact, though the U.S. nuclear arsenal serves multiple roles, the overriding purpose of our nuclear weapons is to prevent a nuclear war, not to fight one. This is the essence of deterrence. Allowing an adversary to believe it has an exploitable advantage in nuclear capabilities is more likely to encourage adversary aggression than deter it. Again, this is the antithesis of stability.

Third, Weber asserts that smaller, tactical nuclear weapons increase the risk of nuclear war because they can be confused with “commonly used conventional, or non-nuclear variants.”⁷ This ignores the fact that Russia has built and deployed thousands of tactical or non-strategic nuclear weapons, many of them dual-capable, for decades.⁸ Unclassified estimates suggest Russia has at least a 10-1 advantage over the United States in this category of nuclear weapons.⁹ Yet, Moscow doesn’t seem to view this as destabilizing. Why is it all right for America’s adversaries to possess such a nuclear capability but not the United States?

Weber praises President George H.W. Bush’s decision to eliminate all U.S. nuclear weapons on surface ships as part of what became known as the Presidential Nuclear Initiatives (PNI). And he lauds President Obama’s decision to permanently dismantle the nuclear version of the Tomahawk land-attack cruise missile (TLAM-N). Yet, he ignores the extended deterrence value such systems provide in assuring U.S. allies of the American commitment to their security and the fact that Russia was supposed to reciprocate in eliminating its ship-based tactical nuclear weapons but did not. To this day, Russia reportedly deploys a multitude of nuclear-capable cruise missiles on surface ships, such as the 3M-14T Kalibr-NK,¹⁰ and is developing newer versions, such as the hypersonic 3M22 Zircon.¹¹ It is this deterrence discrepancy that President Trump in his first term sought to remedy by proposing development of the SLCM-N that Weber opposes. President Biden’s decision to cancel SLCM-N raised concerns among U.S. allies,¹² was rightly opposed by the nation’s leading military officials,¹³ and was overridden by Congress on a bipartisan basis.¹⁴

Refuting the Critics’ Arguments

Others have argued that a sea-launched nuclear cruise missile is too costly, unnecessary for deterrence, redundant with other lower-yield nuclear options, and detrimental to arms control efforts. For example, the Center for Arms Control and Nonproliferation has asserted that the SLCM-N would “weaken the U.S. Navy’s conventional warfighting duties” and that other systems, such as the B61 gravity bomb and the W80 warhead on the vintage 1980s air-launched cruise missile (ALCM), can provide sufficient non-strategic deterrence.¹⁵ A Carnegie



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Endowment analysis argued that “deploying SLCM-Ns would impede the negotiation of verifiable arms control with Russia and/or China when the strategic and political environments improve.”¹⁶ In its 2022 *Nuclear Posture Review*, the Biden Administration argued that the W76-2 low-yield warhead deployed on submarines made SLCM-N “no longer necessary.”¹⁷ Also in 2022, then-Secretary of Defense Lloyd Austin testified that “the marginal capability that [the SLCM-N] provides is far outweighed by the cost.”¹⁸ These arguments, however, also lack validity.

The cost argument is often raised by opponents of nuclear programs who prefer that fiscal resources be spent on other priorities. Yet, the costs associated with nuclear weapons systems are many times less than the costs of conventional forces. While the entire U.S. nuclear modernization program accounts for at most seven percent of the overall Department of Defense (DoD) budget, some 93 percent of the DoD budget is directed elsewhere.¹⁹ As one Congressional Budget Office official described it many years ago, looking for significant budget savings by cutting nuclear programs is a “hunt for small potatoes.”²⁰ And clearly, the costs of ensuring an adequate nuclear deterrent are cheaper than the costs of deterrence failure.

Moreover, the Navy, like the Air Force, has both nuclear and conventional missions. Both are important and need to be resourced appropriately. The way to ensure that the Navy can adequately fulfill its conventional missions is not to reduce or eliminate important nuclear capabilities but to acquire more naval assets to provide greater visibility and forward presence to deter aggression. The current size of the U.S. naval fleet is roughly half of the 600-ship Navy envisioned as necessary by the Reagan Administration with the number of combat warships reportedly at its lowest level since 1916.²¹ As a congressional report concluded, “The Navy is too small to accomplish all the missions with which it is tasked by senior civilian leaders and combatant commanders.”²² And the naval threats to U.S. interests posed by adversaries have only grown since then.

In addition, the survivability of air-breathing platforms is problematic given the fact that U.S. bombers have not been on active strip alert since 1991²³ and must contend with progressively more sophisticated enemy air defenses in an increasingly complex electronic warfare environment. And the notion that SLCM-N will hinder progress on arms control is patently absurd given that U.S. adversaries have reportedly already deployed nuclear-capable sea-launched cruise missiles while the United States has not.²⁴ Deployment of the SLCM-N on surface ships will add additional flexibility to the U.S. deterrent force and help bolster the credibility of U.S. extended deterrence commitments. Indeed, more options equate to greater deterrence credibility.

Conclusion

Deterrence is weakened when the United States allows aggressive adversaries to possess unilateral advantages in nuclear capabilities. This increases the possibility that they will seek to use those advantages for coercive purposes or actually employ nuclear weapons in the



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knowledge that the United States cannot respond in kind and the belief that it will shy away from a massively escalatory response.

Both Russia and China are engaged in an extensive buildup of their respective nuclear forces, which underpin their increasingly belligerent military postures and their highly provocative nuclear threats. This includes significant quantitative and qualitative growth in their strategic and non-strategic nuclear arsenals. They clearly view the relevance and utility of nuclear weapons differently than the United States and are working together in unprecedented ways to undermine U.S. power and influence worldwide.

Given this discrepancy, the United States must not fall into the trap of believing that U.S. nuclear restraint will result in reciprocal restraint on the part of adversaries who seek to recast the world order in their favor at America's expense. History clearly demonstrates the fallacy of such thinking.²⁵ Moreover, the addition of U.S. tactical or non-strategic nuclear capabilities that can help offset the growing imbalance between the United States and its main adversaries, such as SLCM-N, can be useful in bolstering the credibility of U.S. security guarantees to allies and dissuading opponents from believing that they enjoy exploitable advantages at any level of conflict.

To strengthen deterrence, the administration and the Congress should move forward expeditiously to develop the SLCM-N and to improve the overall U.S. nuclear deterrent posture in the face of an ongoing massive nuclear expansion by America's primary adversaries. It is well past time to get on with the job.

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⁵ See, for example, Department of Defense, *Law of War Manual*, June 2015 (updated July 2023), pp.20-40, <https://media.defense.gov/2023/Jul/31/2003271432/-1/-1/0/DOD-LAW-OF-WAR-MANUAL-JUNE-2015-UPDATED-JULY%202023.PDF>.

⁶ Weber, op. cit.

⁷ Ibid.

⁸ Mark B. Schneider, "How Many Nuclear Weapons Does Russia Have? The Size and Characteristics of the Russian Nuclear Stockpile," *Information Series*, No. 566 (Fairfax, VA: National Institute Press, November 2, 2023), https://nipp.org/information_series/mark-b-schneider-how-many-nuclear-weapons-does-russia-have-the-size-and-characteristics-of-the-russian-nuclear-stockpile-no-566-november-2-2023/.

⁹ Peter Brooks, "Russia's Small Nukes are a Big Problem for European Security," The Heritage Foundation, June 17, 2022, <https://www.heritage.org/global-politics/commentary/russias-small-nukes-are-big-problem-european-security#:~:text=Key%20Takeaways,Ukraine%20crisis%20a%20real%20possibility..>



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