

# Low-Yield Trident D5 Warhead

## *Dangerous, Unnecessary, and Destabilizing*

Congress should reject the Trump Administration's 2018 [Nuclear Posture Review](#) request for a new, modified "low-yield" warhead for the Trident D5 submarine-launched ballistic missile. The Administration has requested [\\$22.6 million](#) in DoD's budget for this capability in FY 2019. An NNSA request for more funds is likely forthcoming.

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 de-escalate," 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 conventional warhead for the 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 in rejecting 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)

## Additional Resources

### [A Question of Dollars and Sense: Assessing the 2018 Nuclear Posture Review](#)

- Madelyn Creedon, *Arms Control Today*

### [The Nuclear Posture Review and Russian ‘De-Escalation:’ A Dangerous Solution to Nonexistent Problem](#)

- Dr. Olga Olikier and Andrey Baklitskiy, *War on the Rocks*

### [The Russian Rogue in the New Nuclear Posture Review](#)

- Dr. Kristin Ven Bruusgaard, *Texas National Security Review*

### [Letting It Be an Arms Race](#)

- Dr. Adam Mount, *The Atlantic*

### [The Trump Administration’s ‘Wrong Track’ Nuclear Policies](#)

- Lynn Rusten, *Arms Control Today*

### [‘Low-Yield’ Nukes Are a Very High Threat](#)

- Admiral James Stavridis, *Bloomberg*

### [The Case of the “Low Yield” Trident Warhead](#)

- Stephen Young, *Union of Concerned Scientists*

### [The New U.S. Nuclear Strategy is Flawed and Dangerous. Here’s Why.](#)

- Daryl Kimball and Kingston Reif, *Arms Control Association*

### [The Discrimination Problem: Why Putting Low-Yield Nuclear Weapons on Submarines is So Dangerous](#)

- Dr. Vipin Narang, *War on the Rocks*