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## Plans for nuke-less missiles stir worries

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WASHINGTON - The Pentagon is modifying its deadliest nuclear missile for use as a conventional weapon designed to destroy enemy targets thousands of miles away by slamming into them with brute force.

The project involves the removal of nuclear warheads from two of the 24 Trident D-5 intercontinental ballistic missiles that are carried aboard each of the 12 Ohio-class Trident submarines in the U.S. fleet.

Those missiles usually carry nuclear warheads but would be refitted with non-explosive cones made of high-strength-steel or special concrete. These cones are designed to penetrate Earth's surface and destroy buried command centers.

When launched from a submerged submarine, the D-5 ICBM would barrel up through the ocean powered by its three-stage engine and climb into outer space at speeds up to 20,000 feet per second.

The cone would then plummet back to Earth, guided by sophisticated sensors to within about 50 feet of the target.

Defense officials believe that it would gain enough speed and force to penetrate underground command bunkers. Possible targets include nuclear facilities in North Korea and Iran.

The Pentagon has the project on an accelerated schedule, with the goal of fielding the weapons alongside their nuclear variants in two years.

Each Trident submarine carries 24 D-5 missiles, and the plan calls for using two of those as conventional weapons in each sub.

### 'Playing with fire'

Some national security analysts fret that using the missile as a conventional weapon could unwittingly spark a nuclear retaliation against the United States if Russia were to detect the launch of a conventional D-5 missile and conclude that it was under attack.

"You are playing with fire here in deploying this system," said Bruce Blair, a former Air Force nuclear weapons officer and author on nuclear-weapons safety.

"It's quite dangerous to be mixing up conventional and nuclear weapons in this way on the same submarine using the same delivery systems," said Blair, who heads up the non-partisan Center for Defense Information think tank.

The project "presents a whole new problem for the Russians in discriminating" whether a D-5 missile launch is nuclear or not, he said.

David Mosher, senior nuclear policy analyst with the Rand Corp., agreed. "This is an inherently unsafe activity," he said.

Accidental nuclear war is not such a far-fetched fear. In 1995, Russia initially interpreted the launch of a Norwegian scientific rocket as the onset of a U.S. nuclear attack. Then-President Boris Yeltsin activated his "nuclear briefcase" in the first

stages of preparation to launch a retaliatory strike before the mistake was discovered.

A major technical problem exacerbates the risk of using the D-5 as a conventional weapon: the decaying state of Russia's nuclear forces. Russia's nuclear missiles are tethered to early-warning radars that have been in decline since the dissolution of the Soviet Union in 1991.

And Russia, unlike the United States, lacks sufficient satellites to supplement the radars and confirm whether missile launches are truly under way or are false alarms.

### **North Korea scenario**

One worrisome scenario envisions the outcome of a U.S. attack against North Korea.

In that concept, the United States would launch a conventional D-5 against a North Korean target.

Depending on the submarine's location, the missile could be within 15-minutes of flying time to Russia and the Russians would have only minutes to confirm the missile's path - using decaying equipment - before deciding whether to launch a nuclear strike on the United States.

"We are putting ourselves at the mercy of Russian equipment, rationality and, frankly, sobriety," Blair said.

Last year, retired Sen. Sam Nunn, D-Ga., former chairman of the Senate Armed Services Committee and a nuclear expert, warned that "the survival of each of our nations depends on the accuracy of each other's warning systems" and that the "Russian warning systems are very badly eroded."

In 2002, the United States and Russia signed a treaty requiring both sides to reduce the number of fielded nuclear warheads to no more than 2,200 by 2012. While the two sides generally have warm relations and have agreed not to target one another with nuclear weapons, their arsenals can be rapidly re-targeted in minutes with a few keystrokes of a computer.

The United States and Russia have acknowledged the possibility that Russia's equipment might mistakenly conclude the United States was attacking with nuclear missiles. In 1998, the two countries agreed to set up a joint radar center in Moscow manned by United States and Russian forces to supplement Russia's aging equipment and reduce the threat of accidental war. But the center has yet to open.

### **'Strategic crossroads'**

Although the military has been studying use of the D-5 for conventional use for nearly a decade, the armed forces formally proposed it last month in budget recommendations to Congress for the fiscal year that begins Oct. 1.

In its long-range military strategy also provided to Congress last month, Pentagon officials wrote that they needed to devise new conventional weapons "to help shape the choices of countries at strategic crossroads, strengthen deterrence, and hedge against future strategic uncertainty."

One of those new weapons will be the modified Trident D-5 missile. Within two years, the Pentagon intends to field "a small number of Trident submarine-launched ballistic missiles for use in conventional prompt global strike," the strategy said.

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