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Pentagon Seeks to Fund New Force Of Conventional-Warhead Missiles

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Wednesday, March 8, 2006; A12

The Pentagon, seeking a faster way to thwart threats from hostile states or terrorist groups, is asking Congress for \$500 million to create a new force of conventionally armed, long-range missiles capable of striking anywhere in the world within an hour after an order is given, a senior defense official said yesterday.

The initiative would convert 24 Trident missiles armed with nuclear warheads into rockets carrying conventional warheads and begin fielding them by 2008. The missiles would be launched from submarines and could hit targets 5,000 to 6,000 miles away within 10 yards, the official said.

A primary advantage, defense officials say, is that it would offer U.S. leaders a conventional alternative to nuclear weapons in a distant crisis where speed is essential. They acknowledge a major risk is that other nations could conceivably misinterpret a conventional missile attack as a nuclear strike.

"Will it be interpreted as having a nuclear warhead and elicit . . . a nuclear response?" asked the senior defense official, acknowledging the potential "ambiguity" of the weapon if detected by early-warning systems. Such systems may not be able to determine if an incoming warhead is conventional or nuclear.

The worrisome scenario, he said, "is that they do see it, then they misinterpret it," he told a meeting of defense reporters. The officials spoke on the condition of anonymity because they had not yet briefed Congress.

The senior defense official said the Pentagon seeks to open a debate on the benefits and risks of the proposed conventional ballistic missiles and publicize them as a potential deterrent. "We've done the testing" and developed one of two conventional warheads planned, he said.

Nuclear experts said they share concerns acknowledged yesterday by the senior official, saying the possibility for confusion would be high because U.S. submarines capable of launching the missiles could be armed with conventional and nuclear varieties.

"If we did end up in a crisis where things were really tense, this decision about what is coming at you could be essential," said Hans Kristensen, director of the nuclear information project at the Federation of American Scientists, an arms-control think tank.

The proposed capability, called "prompt global strike," is needed to address threats -- such as terrorist groups and underground weapons stocks and military facilities -- that have proliferated and for which nuclear weapons are "not appropriate" because they are too powerful and inflict high civilian casualties, the official said.

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He said the conventional ballistic missiles could penetrate the ground deeper than other conventional weapons, making it a possible alternative to another proposal for building a "bunker buster" nuclear weapon designed to go three or four yards into the earth and propagate a shock wave.

With estimated flight times of 12 to 24 minutes, the conventionally armed missiles could be used quickly against a remote and fleeting "terrorist stronghold" or against a nation threatening a neighbor with a missile attack -- targets that could take many hours, days, or weeks to reach with cruise missiles, bombers or ground forces, he said.

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