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Official: Pentagon Told to Scrap Conventional Trident Missile Concept

By JOHN T. BENNETT

Pressure from Capitol Hill has derailed Pentagon plans to refit nuclear-tipped Trident missiles with conventional warheads, which will force the U.S. military to seek more expensive ways to perform the prompt global strike (PGS) mission.

Lawmakers worry that placing conventional warheads on the Tridents could spawn confusion - and potentially global chaos - if other nations thought the Cold War-era weapons were carrying their traditional nuclear payloads, according to Lisa Marie Cheney, acting assistant undersecretary of defense for legislative affairs.

During recent meetings with senior defense officials and Trident experts, congressional aides from both political parties instructed the Department of Defense to find another way to take out suspected "fleeting targets," she said Feb. 1 during an industry conference in Arlington, Va.

"Congress wants a [commercially available] solution without a signature of X from years gone by," Cheney said. "A PGS weapon, at this time, is not doable on a former nuclear platform."

Critics of the Trident conversion plan question how some nations - primarily China or Russia - would react if they detected the submarine-fired missile's signature screaming through their airspace.

Those opposed to the idea say those nations would likely think Washington had lofted a nuclear-armed missile in their direction. Proponents, however, are less concerned about that kind of scenario.

Though many lawmakers and congressional aides agree a new prompt strike weapon is needed, the staff members made clear last month that Congress would put the kibosh on any Trident conversion plan. The aides essentially told the Pentagon contingent, "If you come back with that kind of a solution, it will be DOA," Cheney said.

Marine Corps Gen. James Cartwright, chief of U.S. Strategic Command, has said he wants the Pentagon to field a new generation of prompt global strike weapons tailored to take out so-called "fleeting targets."

Several organizations are conducting studies of the PGS concept that could help shape the military's plans. One is an Air Force Space Command-led analysis of alternatives; another is a congressionally-mandated National Academy of Sciences assessment.

Some inside the Pentagon have touted the Trident modification concept because it would give Washington a non-nuclear weapon capable of taking out time-sensitive targets - such as safe houses or meeting spots for extremist or insurgent fighters - faster and cheaper than developing a new weapon from scratch.

The Department of Defense last year failed to garner ample support on Capitol Hill for the Trident conversion plan.

DoD officials last month again attempted to gin up support for the controversial plan by gathering "key congressional staff members" from both sides of the aisle for a detailed briefing. Ultimately, the Pentagon was again rebuffed due to congressional concerns that other nations would have no way - other than calling Washington after detection and getting a clear explanation - of knowing the converted Tridents were not armed with nuclear warheads, according to Cheney and an industry official with knowledge of the meetings.

"We were told to look at the commercial foundation" for developing a weapon based on a non-nuclear

platform, Cheney said. The message from Capitol Hill was for the Pentagon to field a "commercial off-the-shelf technology ... in the near-term," she added.

During last month's lobbying effort, defense officials stressed that scrapping the Trident modification plan would likely force the department to embark on a 10-year program that would also come with a larger price tag. Holding firm to their concerns about using a former nuclear-tipped delivery platform, the staffers "agreed and said, 'Then look there,'" Cheney said.

Facing that major setback to its prompt global strike effort, the Pentagon's top lobbyist said she is hopeful industry can present the department and Congress with "options ... to provide a strategic strike weapon in less than 10 years."

One industry executive who also spoke to the conference, however, said Pentagon officials must clearly define their so-far hazy list of requirements for the prompt strike weapon.

The major U.S. defense manufacturers are "trying to figure out how they should invest in long-range strike and prompt global strike," said Frank Cappuccio, executive vice president and general manager of advanced development programs and strategic planning for Lockheed Martin.

He said "industry has to help shape the program" because the Pentagon has yet to clearly articulate a set of performance requirements for the new prompt strike munition.

So far, Cappuccio said, no voice from within the department has stepped forward and focused industry on "this is what we think the answer is, [so] take all your [PGS] funds and put it into this program."