



National

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Non-nuclear missile plan stalls

Congress, Russia say conventional Trident might lead to a full-scale war

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WASHINGTON — Congress has derailed a Pentagon project that would arm some intercontinental ballistic missiles with conventional warheads to provide a non-nuclear option of striking targets thousands of miles away.

The Pentagon had sought to deploy the conventional-warhead version of the Navy's Trident ICE as early as next year.

Four committees — the House and Senate armed services committee and appropriations committees — have proposed either killing the program or delaying it for further study.

The upshot is that the Pentagon program won't go forward next year.

The lawmakers are concerned that Russia or China might mistake a submarine-launched conventional Trident for a nuclear attack and retaliate with their own nuclear weapons.

The project would involve the removal of nuclear warheads from some of the 24 Trident missiles carried aboard each of the 12 Ohio-class submarines, giving the vessel the versatility of launching a conventional or a nuclear weapon.

The impetus for the conventional Trident came from the military need to rapidly attack distant so-called "high value" targets without using atomic bombs.

Possible targets are alleged nuclear weapons facilities in North Korea and Iran.

Congressional worries were summed up by the Senate Armed Services Committee's report that said it "is essential to maintain a bright line" between nuclear weapons such as the Trident and any conventional long-range strike weapons, which "should be clearly and unambiguously non-nuclear."

As a result, the panel has proposed eliminating funds for the Trident while directing the military to study other weapons.

Championed by Marine Corps Gen. James Cartwright, the new vice chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, the conventional Trident missile also has drawn harsh criticism from Russian President Vladimir Putin, who said the weapon "could provoke an inappropriate response from one of the nuclear powers ... a full-scale counterattack using strategic nuclear forces."

The scenario that worries some is what could happen if the U.S. and North Korea came to blows and a submarine was ordered to launch a conventional Trident missile at a North Korean target near Russia.

Depending on the sub's location, Russia could have as little as 15 minutes to verify the missile's trajectory and that it was conventional before deciding to launch a nuclear strike on the U.S.

William Perry, the former Clinton administration defense secretary, told a House panel this summer that the threat of accidental nuclear war "is aggravated by a Trident with mixed forces

of both nuclear and non-nuclear missiles.

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 Bo Yeltsin activated his "nuclear briefcase" in the first stages of preparation to launch a retaliatory strike before the mistake was discovered.

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