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Air Force Proposes New Strike Missile

InsideDefense.com NewsStand | Elaine M. Grossman | April 08, 2006

The Air Force is proposing to build a "midterm solution" for the Pentagon's new "prompt global strike" mission under which land-based boosters traditionally used for nuclear weapons would be reconfigured and fitted with conventional warheads, according to Air Force Space Command.

Though the command is billing the so-called "Conventional Strike Missile" as a quick-flying weapon available by 2013, some on Capitol Hill may be tempted to embrace such a weapon as an alternative to fielding a controversial Navy D-5 submarine-launched missile four years earlier.

The Bush administration has requested fiscal year 2007 funds to begin the \$503 million Conventional Trident Modification effort, under which four conventional warheads would be fitted on each of 24 missiles that typically carry nuclear weapons. But some Democratic lawmakers have criticized the Trident concept, saying it could be too risky to launch a conventional missile that looks identical to the nuclear version of the D-5 fielded on the same submarines (*Inside the Pentagon*, March 9, p1).

U.S. Strategic Command chief Gen. James Cartwright has said he needs a prompt global strike capability to hold fleeting targets at risk. He would like a conventional weapon that could arrive on target within one hour of an order to launch, a capability currently offered only by nuclear-armed missiles. A conventional alternative would make U.S. threats more credible against targets such as a terrorist leader staying briefly at a safe house or a North Korean nuclear missile being readied on a launch pad, defense analysts say.

For the long term, Air Force Space Command plans to begin an "analysis of alternatives" later this year to explore technologies to be developed by 2020 for the mission.

Cartwright reportedly has told other defense officials he recognizes the conventional Trident missile is not optimal for the mission, but it remains the only way he can get an initial capability fielded in the near term. The Navy has said it could begin fielding the conventional D-5s aboard its stealthy subs by 2009 and achieve full operational capability by 2011.

The strategic commander also has told his colleagues he regards a land-based, long-range missile as desirable for the long term.

Now the Air Force is proposing a land-based option "that can provide an initial capability as early as 2013 in a first block deployment," according to Col. Richard Patenaude, chief of the deterrence and strike division for Air Force Space Command. "It will be designed to carry multiple payloads and will greatly improve today's global strike capability."

In a March 16 telephone interview with *ITP*, Air Force Chief of Staff Gen. T. Michael Moseley hinted his service was readying what a reporter called a "Plan B" option, in case Congress balks at funding the conventional Trident missile.

"Well, we're working that. We're working that," Moseley said. "But, you know, that's not something to talk about right now."

Patenaude indicated he was ready to describe the plan this week in an e-mailed response to questions from *ITP*.

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He said the missile may be based in the continental United States or abroad, and "may or may not" be considered an intercontinental ballistic missile under START Treaty counting rules.

In defending the Pentagon decision to move ahead with the conventional Trident, some defense officials have suggested a conventional land-based alternative could be problematic because Russia or China may misinterpret a launch as a potential nuclear threat to their nations.

Patenaude took pains to make clear the Air Force "has no plans to put conventional warheads on current operational ICBMs or [use] their silos."

Other defense officials have described how a land-based missile could be configured so it is incapable of carrying a nuclear payload and use a trajectory to its target that would not threaten other nuclear weapons nations. It also could be inspected by the Russians under existing arms control regimes; based on a U.S. coastline in Florida or California so launch debris could fall in the ocean rather than on land; and made capable of being rapidly retargeted.

By contrast, critics have complained the Trident submarines would use a weapon virtually identical to its nuclear-armed twin; remain on patrol typically just off Russian coasts, potentially posing at least a debris threat to Russia; likely be closed to Russian onsite inspection; and possibly take hours or longer to receive target data and steam within range of nations where fleeting threats may appear.

Cartwright offered subtle acknowledgment of the geographic challenge during March 29 testimony before the Senate Armed Services strategic forces subcommittee.

"Prompt global strike . . . starts to get at the issue of those targets that will not necessarily emerge next to where we're based or where our normal patrol routes are," he said.

Although there would be some technologies common to both nuclear-armed ICBMs on alert and the new Conventional Strike Missile, the land-based option offers some "unique advantage[s]," says Col. Patenaude.

One is "the ability to geographically separate conventional and nuclear capabilities," he says. "That separation is a significant factor in reducing international concerns of misinterpretation and misunderstanding."

A conventional land-based missile also would differ from its nuclear counterparts in its "performance requirements, operational environments and concepts of operations," according to Patenaude.

In Senate testimony alongside Cartwright on March 29, Assistant Secretary of Defense for International Security Policy Peter Flory said of the Trident concept that the Pentagon could use diplomatic tools to increase transparency and mitigate the risk of misunderstandings. The Navy might also alter the way in which it launches the conventional D-5 from Trident submarines so that Russia (or, in the future, other nations with early warning capability) could differentiate it from a nuclear-tipped missile, he said.

"In addition to hotlines and the potential for advanced notification of a launch, we have other means for creating transparency and building confidence. One of those would include military-to-military talks between our respective forces so others would understand our concept of operations for this new capability," Flory told lawmakers. "Other options would include ways in which we could structure and operate the system to provide a notably different phenomenology about a launch, so that a launch of one of these systems would not in fact look just like a launch of a nuclear system."

"There's all sorts of technical things that you might be able to do," Cartwright told *ITP* during a brief recess in the hearing. The Navy could "alter the flight profile [or] change the range to convert energy," among other possibilities, he said.

Critics have raised concern that altering the conventional D-5's flight profile by using a depressed trajectory could make the weapon even more destabilizing because its flight path may become undetectable by Russian

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radar. The introduction of this operational capability into the Navy arsenal could unintentionally spark an arms race with other nations -- potentially China -- that would not benefit the United States, some critics say.

Cartwright downplayed the risk of international ambiguity in the wake of a conventional Trident launch, referring to earlier testimony that, for now at least, Russia is the only nation with sufficient early warning capability to detect a missile flight.

Undertaking an effort to differentiate the two kinds of missiles "presupposes that somebody can see the difference," Cartwright said. "I don't know that that population is that great or that [detection capability] is that assured."

Thus he looks more to other measures to bolster international stability in developing and potentially using the conventional Trident missile.

"I still believe that exercising, talking about it openly, demonstrating it and then notification protocols -- whether they be in treaties or other venues -- are really a more reliable way to go at it today," Cartwright said.

Inasmuch as the strategic commander desires the near-term Trident option, he is fully behind the Air Force concept for the midterm land missile, as well, says one defense analyst, speaking on condition of not being named.

"Cartwright is actively seeking the midterm solution," said this source, adding the Pentagon may well speed up the time table for the Air Force missile if the Navy's D-5 modification becomes unfeasible.

Though Cartwright did not address the notion of an Air Force proposal for a Conventional Strike Missile during his testimony, he did endorse the idea that a proliferation of prompt global strike concepts among the military services is a good thing.

"We allow and really encourage tension in the system, competition in the system, for the concepts; in this case, looking at the Army's [Advanced Hypersonic Weapon] system versus what the Navy might be thinking about versus what the Air Force might look at in the next generation of their Minuteman or other systems," he said during the hearing.

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