

Acting SECNAV Says Memo Doesn't Mean He's Canceling Nuclear Sea-Launched Cruise Missile



The crew of the Los Angeles-class fast-attack submarine USS Annapolis (SSN 760) successfully launches Tomahawk cruise missiles off the coast of southern California as part of a Tomahawk Flight Test (TFT) June 26, 2018. (U.S. Navy photo by Mass Communication Specialist 1st Class Ronald Gutridge)

ARLINGTON, Va. – Acting Navy Secretary Thomas Harker says he is not planning to scrap the Nuclear Sea-Launched Cruise Missile (SLCM-N) despite a memo that appears to indicate otherwise.

“The program is in our FY22 (fiscal year 2022) budget,” Harker told a House Armed Services Committee hearing June 15. Some Republican lawmakers were outraged after news outlets reported earlier this month that Harker directed the Navy in a June 4 memo to “defund” the sea-launched cruise missile in fiscal 2023.

The memo surfaced after the Pentagon released the fiscal 2022 defense budget but before the start of a Nuclear Posture Review (NPR), a statement by the senior Republicans on the House and Senate armed services committees noted. The NPR is an appraisal of U.S. nuclear policy conducted when a new administration takes office.

The statement, issued by Rep. Mike Rogers of Alabama and Sen. Jim Inhofe of Oklahoma, called Harker’s move “bewildering and short-sighted. The Biden administration has decided to project weakness ahead of a summit with Vladimir Putin – another gift to our adversaries.”

In the process of determining within the Navy Department which items to put in the 2023 budget request, Harker told the HASC “my initial guidance was based on the fact that the overall posture review and the [updated] National Defense Strategy have not been completed, so I didn’t want anyone to assume that [SLCM-N] would be in until we had further guidance from the Nuclear Posture Review.”

Under questioning by Rep. Michael Turner, R-Ohio, Harker conceded his background and experience was in accounting and finance, not making strategic nuclear weapons decisions. He also said he had not consulted anyone else in the Pentagon, including Chief of Naval Operations Adm. Mike Gilday, before writing his memo. Turner accused Harker’s action of undermining “President Biden and the United States” by indicating a nuclear weapon “is going to be unilaterally defunded without any negotiations or without receiving any concessions from Russia.”

Harker asserted “Sir, it was a preliminary, internal document.” Sounding skeptical of Harker’s claim he was the only decision maker in the matter, Turner asked the acting secretary to deliver to the committee “all communications concerning the deliberations, advice, review, directions and analyses” undertaken to write the memo. Harker said he would.

The HASC chairman, Rep. Adam Smith, D-Washington, has stated his opposition to the low-yield warhead and SLCM-N as being destabilizing to the nuclear balance. During the presidential election campaign, Biden said he wanted to reduce U.S. reliance on nuclear weapons.