

Congressman Asks SECDEF to Direct Recission of SLCM-N Cancellation Memo



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 / Mass Communication Specialist 1st Class Ronald Gutridge*

ARLINGTON, Va. – The ranking member of the Strategic Forces subcommittee of the House Armed Services Committee (HASC) said he asked Secretary of Defense Lloyd Austin to direct the acting Navy Secretary to rescind a directive that cancels a sea-launched nuclear cruise missile program, the SLCM-N.

The Defense Department's (DoD's) 2018 Nuclear Posture Review (NPR) said the department would pursue a Sea-Launched Cruise Missile-Nuclear (SLCM-N) "leveraging existing technologies to help ensure its cost effectiveness. SLCM will provide a needed non-strategic regional presence, an assured response capability. It also will provide an arms-control compliant response to Russia's non-compliance with the Intermediate-range Nuclear Forces Treaty, its non-strategic nuclear arsenal, and its other destabilizing behaviors."

The review asserted an SLCM "will not require or rely on host nation support to provide deterrent effect. They will provide additional diversity in platforms, range, and survivability, and a valuable hedge against future nuclear 'break out' scenarios."

The president's 2022 budget would, if approved by Congress, fund the SLCM-N in 2022. But a memorandum by Acting Navy Secretary Thomas Harker – issued before the summit meeting in Switzerland between U.S. President Biden and Russian President

Vladimir Putin – directed that the SLCM-N be defunded in the 2023 budget, said Rep. Mike Turner, R-Ohio, speaking July 7 in a webinar of the Hudson Institute.

“The acting secretary of the Navy issues a memorandum that instructed the staff constructing the budget for 2023 to defund this sea-launched cruise missile,” Turner said. “It is currently funded in this [2022] budget as it came over from President Biden’s submission. In his testimony, he [Harker] claimed to not have spoken to anyone” and made the decision “just on his own.”

Turner pointed out the need for a flexible deterrent, that SLCM-N is “a weapon that is absolutely needed” to counter Russia’s INF treaty violations.

“The acting secretary, in saying that he didn’t speak to anyone, the secretary of defense and the chief of staff have all said that they were not involved officially,” Turner said. “Now, what’s horrible about this is that Biden was on his way to go meet with Putin to have their so-called summit, and on Biden’s agenda was, of course, arms control, and here we have the acting secretary of the Navy basically telling Russia that we’re not going to field this, we’re not going to develop it, we’re going to defund it. And it really undermined the president that the acting secretary admitted that he understood that his actions had undermined the president of the United States.”

In June 15 testimony before the HASC, Harker said that, in considering the 2023 budget in work, “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.”

Turner said he sees an undercurrent of within DoD that is

undermining the U.S. nuclear strategic deterrent through universal disarmament of the United States.

“Here we have a missile that has a capability that we need and that we have this desire for arms control,” Turner said, noting that canceling a needed capability “would unilaterally concede and get nothing from the Russians or Chinese in any concessions in their systems. But that undercurrent of policy at DoD really has to be brought forward. ... The [next] Nuclear Posture Review is ongoing; even the assessment of alternatives for the SLCM itself is ongoing.

“Now I’ve asked the secretary of defense to direct the acting secretary of the Navy to rescind this direction,” Turner said. “I certainly hope that he does that. It sends the wrong message.”

The HASC chairman, Rep. Adam Smith, D-Washington, has stated his opposition to the SLCM as being destabilizing to the nuclear balance.