

# Nuclear Threat Reduction: The Addition of Sea-Launched Cruise Missiles to U.S. Nuclear Arsenal is Unnecessary and Destabilizing

## ACTION

### Members of Congress should reject any proposals to fund the SLCM-N

#### Background

Nuclear-armed Sea-launched cruise missiles (SLCM-N) were first developed and deployed in the 1980s. In 1991, and with the end of the Cold War, these and other non-strategic sea-based nuclear-armed missiles were [withdrawn](#) from deployment under the George H.W. Bush Presidential Nuclear Initiatives. The [Obama Nuclear Posture Review of 2010](#) determined that the SLCM-N was redundant and by 2013, the program was [fully retired](#). In 2018, the [Trump administration's Nuclear Posture Review](#) called for the development of a new nuclear-armed sea-based cruise missile to give the president "more credible" options for nuclear weapons use. In 2022, the Biden administration sought to cancel funding for research and development of the SLCM-N in its budget [request](#) for 2023, saying it is "cost prohibitive and the acquisition schedule would have delivered capability late to need". There is no funding allocated to this program in the Fiscal Year 2024 budget [request](#) either. There is no exact estimate of the costs associated with this program, but according to the Congressional Research Service, just fielding the program could have an [estimated](#) cost of over \$9 billion through 2030. In the past, some lawmakers have tried to [ban](#) this kind of weaponry. The Congress, however, [voted](#) to continue to explore the SLCM-N last year.



A Tomahawk cruise missile launches from the Arleigh Burke-class guided-missile destroyer USS Shoup (DDG-86) for a live-fire exercise during Valiant Shield 2018 on Sept. 18, 2018

Source: U.S. Navy

#### The Case Against The SLCM-N

- Increased risk of nuclear war: The acquisition of the SLCM-N would lower the threshold for nuclear use and increase the likelihood of nuclear war by signaling a war-fighting posture. These missiles would be "virtually indistinguishable" from conventional missiles when launched and this could lead to miscalculation and nuclear retaliation.
- Operational Challenges for the Navy: The Pursuit of SLCM-N creates operational challenges for the Navy, resulting in their [reluctance](#) to host the program. If pursued, the SLCM-N would require the navy to consider using specialized equipment and training. This could mean pivoting the current logistical resources away from more usable conventional weapons or ongoing operations.
- Undermining Arms Control: The development of a new type of nuclear weapon would likely prompt Russia and China to respond by modernizing their own systems, fueling dangerous nuclear competition. See misconception II.

#### Misconceptions About The SLCM-N

- Misconception I: SLCM-N fills a "deterrence gap": Some [argue](#) that a low-yield sea-launched missile provides the U.S. with an important additional way to retaliate against "limited" nuclear use by an adversary. In reality, once nuclear weapons are used by nuclear-armed adversaries, there is no guarantee that we will "not end up with [Armageddon](#)."
- Misconception II: SLCM-N provides "[leverage](#)" for arms control: Even if pursued, the Navy cannot deploy these missiles until late 2020s, so the development is unlikely to affect Russia's arms control calculus in the near term. If anything, a detailed [analysis](#) of the history of U.S. arms control with Russia shows that this pursuit would likely lead them to further build up their nuclear forces.

**We ask that** members of Congress reject any proposals for additional funding for the SLCM-N in the fiscal year 2024 budget cycle.

