



Enhancing Deterrence with Supplemental Nuclear Capabilities

Non-Strategic Nuclear Weapons: A Growing Imbalance

In addition to modernization and fielding of new strategic nuclear capabilities, Russia is modernizing and expanding its arsenal of approximately 2,000 non-strategic nuclear weapons. This includes nuclear torpedoes, nuclear air and missile defense interceptors, nuclear depth charges, nuclear landmines, and nuclear artillery shells—more than a dozen types. None of these are limited by any current arms control treaty.

The U.S. and Russia agreed to reduce or eliminate many of these non-strategic nuclear weapons at the end of the Cold War. Although the U.S. did so, and retains only a small number of one type (B61 nuclear gravity bombs), Russia has not fulfilled its commitment and has retained, modernized, and is expanding its non-strategic arsenal. The numerical imbalance in non-strategic nuclear weapons between Russia and the U.S. is very large and growing.

Russia's public statements and nuclear threats, its well-documented and well-rehearsed military doctrine to use nuclear weapons to "de-escalate" a conventional conflict, and its military resourcing decisions make clear that Russian leaders may perceive they can use these lower-yield, non-strategic nuclear weapons to coerce other countries and win a conventional conflict without a nuclear response from the United States.

U.S. Response

The U.S. nuclear deterrent must dissuade any adversary from mistakenly believing it can benefit from using nuclear weapons—even in a limited way—against the U.S. or its allies and partners. The 2018 Nuclear Posture Review concluded that the U.S. must adapt its existing forces with two modest supplemental capabilities to ensure that Russia, China, and others do not perceive a gap in our regional deterrence posture.

These supplemental capabilities do not require nuclear testing, do not violate arms control treaties, and do not lower the U.S. threshold for nuclear use—these capabilities are intended to raise Russia's nuclear threshold, not lower our own. They will address the imbalance in non-strategic nuclear weapons without matching Russia system for system and provide leverage for future arms control efforts.

By modifying a small number of existing submarine-launched ballistic missile warheads to provide a low-yield option and by restoring a modern nuclear sea-launched cruise missile to the force, the U.S. will have assured and credible response options to nuclear attacks of any magnitude. This will discourage adversaries from limited nuclear attacks—strengthening deterrence and helping prevent conflict in the first place.

"Russia demonstrates its perception of the advantage these systems provide...Correcting this mistaken Russian perception is a strategic imperative."

– 2018 Nuclear Posture Review

"Moscow has clearly stated in their doctrine that they are prepared to use nuclear weapons in regional conflicts: 'escalate-to-de-escalate' as they say."

– NATO Secretary General
Jens Stoltenberg

"Russia's non-strategic nuclear weapons stockpile is of concern because it facilitates Moscow's mistaken belief that limited nuclear first use, potentially including low-yield weapons, can provide Russia a coercive advantage in crises and at lower levels of conflict. The 2018 Nuclear Posture Review calls for adjustments to U.S. nuclear forces to close this perceived gap on the escalation ladder and reinforce deterrence against low-yield nuclear use."

– General Curtis Scaparrotti, Commander, U.S. European Command
