

In Defense of the Low Yield Nuclear Trident Missile

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Why do states go to war? Obviously there is no mechanical formula where if factors x , y , and z are present – then war is certain. Individual leadership [personalities](#), the anarchic international [system](#), the [structure](#) of political incentives, and multiple other theories are plausible answers to the question; but one misconception remains popular today: weapons cause war.

As strategist Colin Gray (who according to Secretary of Defense Mattis is [“the most near-faultless strategist alive today”](#)) has [expounded upon at length](#), the amount and sophistication of a state’s arms are properly categorized as the effect, not the primary cause of war. “States do not fight because they are heavily armed; rather they are heavily armed because they judge war to be a serious possibility.”

In the debate about how many and what type of weapons the United States should maintain, failure to understand and correctly adjust U.S. strategy to the real causes of war can have catastrophic effects. One such weapon in the critics’ crosshairs is the proposed modification of a “small number” of nuclear warheads on submarine-launched ballistic missiles. This modification would [reportedly](#) change a small number of the high yield nuclear warheads to low yield nuclear warheads.

Despite [broad bipartisan](#) support of the proposed change, including from the [past two Secretaries](#) of Defense who served under President Obama, critics have labeled it as [“more usable,”](#) a [“gateway to nuclear catastrophe,”](#) and the igniter of a [“global nuclear arms race.”](#)

Are critics right that a potentially less-destructive, but still massively-powerful, nuclear weapon is “easier” to use, thus making nuclear war and arms races more likely? The available evidence suggests otherwise.

First, the claim that low-yield nuclear weapons can make a President’s trigger finger itchier is simply unsupported by history. Despite reportedly [having thousands](#) of low-yield sea, air, and land-based nuclear weapons throughout the 1960s and 1970s, U.S. Presidents did not seem any more inclined to begin a nuclear war or escalate a nuclear crisis. The United States and the [Soviet Union](#), and now Russia, have reportedly had low-yield nuclear weapons for over half a century, so if they were such destabilizing weapons, it seems we should have evidence for it by

now. The nuclear crises of the Cold War were caused by differences in political preferences, not because of the yields of nuclear weapons.

Again, if the total number of non-strategic nuclear weapons was linked to the possibility of war, the United States and Russia should be having the most peaceful political relations in decades, since the number of [U.S.](#) and [Russian](#) non-strategic nuclear weapons is likely at its lowest since the 1960s. The current antagonistic relationship then must be caused by something other than non-strategic nuclear weapons themselves. Even less so considering the NPR proposal calls for a “small number” of nuclear warheads to be modified, hardly the thousands from the Cold War.

Understand that the weapons by themselves are not unnerving, our adversaries’ political and military intentions for utilizing them are. The British [reportedly](#) have low-yield options on their submarine-launched nuclear missiles, but they are not a revisionist power, so we do not fear them. Russia, on the other hand, retains and is modernizing about [2,000](#) of these “battlefield” nuclear weapons, has revisionist intentions, and regularly threatens their use against U.S. allies and partners; thus the United States views it as a threat.

Second, the claim that modifying a few U.S. nuclear warheads will cause a “global nuclear arms race” is absurd on its face; timelines since the Cold War, in fact, show otherwise. Partially declassified CIA documents show that [as early as 1999](#) the intelligence community suspected Russia was developing [low and very low yield nuclear weapons](#), yet the United States went in the opposite direction by moving to [consolidate](#) and retire four [reportedly](#) variable-yield warheads with low options.

And at a total cost of about [\\$65 million](#) over [five years](#) for the low-yield modification program, the problem is not money.

Fundamentally, it is the fear of causing a nuclear war that has critics so concerned – a legitimate fear that should not be brushed aside casually. Again, however, weapons don’t make war, political intentions do. Military strategist Carl von Clausewitz said “war is the continuation of politics by other means,” and weapons are only the end result, not the cause.

At the end of the Cold War, Russia likely maintained more strategic and non-strategic nuclear weapons than it does today; but by 1994 the U.S. Department of Defense could speak about “partnership with Russia” and a new era of improved political relations. Again, the weapons themselves did not cause the Cold War, opposing political and ideological goals caused the Cold War.

Thus, U.S. political considerations should be the lens through which we view nuclear weapons. The primary purpose of the low-yield nuclear missile is to credibly communicate to Russia or any other competitor that there will be no advantage in striking the United States or its allies, even with a low-yield nuclear weapon. This is not a nuclear “war-fighting” weapon, it is primarily a political weapon aimed at dissuading any adversary’s misguided dark fantasy of possibly fighting and winning a nuclear war.

Existing U.S. low-yield options are air-delivered, but as U.S. STRATCOM Commander General John Hyten [testified](#) recently, they “may not be the right response in terms of timeliness and survivability to get to where the threat is.” This point is where critics of the low-yield option, like former Secretary of Defense [William Perry](#), are led astray. The bipartisan 1983 [Scowcroft Commission](#), on which Secretary Perry served as a member, stated: “Deterrence...requires military effectiveness.” The purpose of the low-yield weapon is not to fight a limited nuclear war, it is to deter such a fight; and one of the characteristics required for that mission is “military effectiveness,” i.e., range, speed, and survivability.

The real source of nuclear danger today [is not](#) the replacement of the aging U.S. nuclear arsenal, nor the modification of a few U.S. warheads. Rather, the nuclear threat radiates from the heart of Moscow in the forms of serial violation of arms control agreements, nuclear targeting threats, and a revisionist state policy which respects no boundaries.

State and non-state actors, including disarmament activists, would do well to concentrate their efforts on the Russian political problem, not the U.S. military response.

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