

CNO: Keep R&D Alive for Nuclear Sea-Launched Cruise Missile



A Tomahawk cruise missile is removed from Los Angeles-class attack submarine USS Asheville at Polaris Point, Guam. An SLCM-N would occupy the place in naval armament formerly occupied by the now retired nuclear-armed version of the Tomahawk. U.S. NAVY / Mass Communication Specialist 1st Class Victoria Kinney

WASHINGTON – The Navy's top officer did not request any funds for procurement of the Sea-Launched Cruise Missile – Nuclear (SLCM-N) in the 2023 budget proposal but would like to fund a small amount of research and development to keep the industrial base in place should the missile be funded in the future.

Testifying May 11 before the House Armed Services Committee,

Chief of Naval Operations Adm. Michael Gilday said that “having served on a nuclear-capable surface ship in the late 1980s, that mission does not come without a cost. There is a significant amount of attention that has to be paid to any platform that carries that type of weapon in terms of training, in terms of sustainability, in terms of reliability, in terms of the force’s readiness to be able to use them and be able to conduct that mission. I’m not convinced yet that we need to make a \$31 billion investment in that particular system to close that particular gap.

“It makes sense to me that we keep a small amount of money against R&D to keep that ‘warm,’ if you will, within the industrial base, while we get a better understanding of the world we live in with two nuclear-capable peer competitors,” Gilday said. “At the same time, the fact that we’re about to put hypersonics into play this year with the Army, in 2025 with the Navy, that’s also a deterrent we should factor in the conversation in terms of the investments that we’re going to make, in my opinion.”

Rep. Doug Lamborn, R-Colorado, addressed the CNO and reminded the officials present that this year the HASC had heard testimony from Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff Gen. Mark Milley, Vice Chairman of the Joint Chief of Staff Adm. Christopher Grady, U.S. Strategic Command Commander Adm. Charles Richard and U.S. European Command Commander Gen. Todd Wolters that “their best military advice was to continue with the SLCM-N program.

“Do you believe that we should continue the program or at least the research so that we don’t lose that capability in the workforce and in our labs that’s actually proceeding apace right now and, then, from that, make informed decisions about whether or not we want to invest a significant amount of money in that capability understanding what both of those nuclear-powered peers bring to the table?” he said.

Lamborn said that opponents of SLCM-N say the Navy did not have the bandwidth to handle a nuclear cruise missile aboard ships, but he pointed out that the Navy deployed a nuclear-armed version of the Tomahawk cruise missile on ships and submarines during and after the Cold War.

He asked the CNO if “given the mission of certifying and carrying a SLCM-N, are you confident that the Navy would be up to the task, given that assignment?”

Gilday affirmed that “given the assignment, we would, sir,” while again noting the cost. “I think it deserves some study in terms on how we’re going to balance that, given other things that we’re doing.”

Lamborn told Navy Secretary Carlos Del Toro, who also testified at the hearing, that Del Toro’s predecessor, “promised certain documents and emails related to the then-rumored cancellation of the SLCM-N program. Last year’s NDAA [National Defense Authorization Act] fenced a large amount of money until these documents and the analysis of alternatives for SLCM-N were provided to Congress. We have yet to receive any of this information.

“Despite the proposal in the Nuclear Posture Review to cancel SLCM-N and its being zeroed out of this year’s proposed budget request, when can we expect the Navy to comply with our directives and produce these documents?” Lamborn asked.

Del Toro responded that he “was not aware that those documents had not been provided to the Congress, however I will promise you that I will go back and ensure that we do provide necessary required documents that you have requested.”