

U.S. Must Add Low-Yield Nuclear Arsenal to Counter Russian Upgrades, Joint Chiefs Vice Chairman Tells Conference

ARLINGTON, Virginia – The United States' ability to deter a strategic nuclear attack is being eroded by Russia's fielding of new types of weapons, and the U.S. must respond with new nuclear systems, which may include a sea-launched, nuclear-armed cruise missile, the country's second highest military officer said April 25.

"Our strategic deterrence is threatened by new classes of weapons. We have to address that," said Air Force Gen. Paul J. Selva, the vice chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff.

One of the weapons that must be matched is the arsenal of low-yield nuclear warheads that Russian President Vladimir Putin has mentioned in a several provocative speeches, Selva said.

Although Russia has had low-yield nuclear weapons for decades, what is new is Russia's recently stated strategy of using them early in a conflict to force the United States to capitulate rather than replying with the high-power strategic weapons, Selva said. "They call that escalate to de-escalate. That's inherently destabilizing."

"Until a few months ago, we didn't possess a similar low-yield nuclear weapon with which to match that threat. We could only respond with a big one," he said. That is why last year's Nuclear Posture Review advocated producing lower-yield warheads, the first of which were completed recently.

Production of lower-yield nuclear warheads, which were phased out of the U.S. inventory after the end of the Cold War, was strongly attacked by opponents of nuclear weapons, who argued that such weapons could make it easier for a president to turn to atomic arms in a conflict.

Selva said: "If any competitor attacks us with a low-yield weapon, we have the option to reply in kind, which is inherently de-escalatory."

Asked how the new warheads would be used, Selva said the preference was a sea-launched cruise missile, like nuclear-armed Tomahawk land attack missiles (TLAM) that were deployed on U.S. attack submarines during the Cold War, rather than strategic weapons launched from Ohio-class ballistic missile subs.

"Right now, we don't possess a sea-launched cruise missile that has a nuclear warhead. We have advocated for it and are working on how we might regain a sea-launched cruise missile," he said. That weapon "provides the capability to extend our deterrent umbrella over some of our Asian allies that we now have to use intercontinental-range systems."

Selva, who is a key player in nearly all aspects of strategic weapons development and employment, devoted much of his keynote address to the Strategic Deterrence Coalition conference at the Key Bridge Marriott to the massive program of modernizing all elements of the strategic deterrent triad, which consists of the 14 Ohio-class subs and their Polaris missiles, B-52 bombers and land-based Minuteman III ICBMs.

"What is our backstop to all types of nuclear threat? It is our strategic triad, forces that are capable of replying to any use of nuclear weapons against the United States or its allies?" Selva said.

"We must maintain a credible, safe, secure, reliable nuclear arsenal until we can negotiate" a global agreement "to rid the

world of nuclear weapons.”

But Selva said the military has “squeezed every bit of life out of” existing weapons and “left ourselves very little margin to be able to deliver the new systems to replace them.”

The Ohio-class submarines “will age out of the fleet by the time we bring in the Columbia class” that would replace them, the B-52s would be nearly 90 years old when replaced by the new B-21s and the Minuteman missiles may need a fourth life extension, when only two were planned, he said.

Although Selva said the total program is estimated to cost \$320 billion over 10 years – a figure disputed by private and government analysts – at the peak the program would need “roughly 3.2 to 3.7 percent of the defense budget,” which he called “a bargain.”