Pentagon Mulling Attacks Using "Tactical" Nuclear Weapons

The strategy is being overseen by Elbridge Colby, the Pentagon's Policy Chief, who has long called for the U.S. to prepare to fight a "limited nuclear war."

By Dave DeCamp

Edited for space by Nukewatch Staff

The Pentagon is reportedly drafting a new nuclear strategy that's expected to emphasize the use of tactical nuclear weapons to give the president more "options" in a potential nuclear conflict.

The strategy, first reported by NBC News, is being drafted by the Pentagon's Elbridge Colby, who has for more than a decade called for the U.S. to develop additional capabilities to fight a "limited nuclear war."

The idea would be to shift the U.S. nuclear strategy away from the focus on using strategic nuclear weapons to wipe out an adversary's nuclear capabilities, and focus more on the possibility of using smaller, tactical nuclear weapons in a "regional" conflict.

[Editor's note: The word "smaller" here is an extremely misleading understatement. The "tactical" Air Force B61-12 gravity bomb has a 50-kiloton explosive force, which is four times greater than the U.S. atomic bomb that killed 140,000 people at Hiroshima, Japan in 1945.]

"If you actually want extended deterrence to be credible, you have to provide the nation's political leadership with nuclear capabilities that common sense indicates you could actually use," a source told NBC. "Otherwise you're reducing our leadership's options to extreme choices that the adversary won't find credible."

While the potential strategy would be carried out in the name of deterrence and preventing war, arms control advocates have strongly warned against the idea of developing more tactical nuclear weapons to prepare for a potential limited nuclear conflict over concerns that it would make nuclear war much more likely and that any nuclear exchange would likely lead to a global catastrophe.

"Without a firm rejection of the option to use nuclear weapons first in a conflict, by building and fielding more tactical nuclear weapons the administration is signaling its intention to use them against enemy forces and industrial infrastructure in a conflict," the Arms Control Association (ACA) said in response to the NBC report.

The ACA said that it "strongly opposes the administration's decision to build more tactical nuclear weapons to supplement the options that exist" and pointed to the fact that the U.S. already has at least two types of tactical nuclear weapons, including B61-12 gravity bombs, which are deployed in Europe, and the W76-2 warhead for the Trident II submarine-launched ballistic missile.

The ACA said the U.S. Navy is also "acquiring a new nuclear-capable sea-launched cruise missile that may be available at the end of the decade for possible use in conflict with China."

Breaking Defense online reported that Colby announced on August 5 that the Pentagon was reviewing the U.S. nuclear posture and repeatedly emphasized the term "options" in a speech he delivered that has not been made public.

Colby has been one of the leading voices in Washington's policy circles advocating for the U.S. to prepare for "limited nuclear war." In a 2015 paper for the Center for a New American Security titled "A Nuclear Strategy and Posture for 2030," Colby said the U.S. "should make a special effort to develop the platforms and weapons, doctrine, planning capacity, and other capabilities needed to fight a limited nuclear war more effectively than plausible adversaries."

He said that the ideal U.S. nuclear force is: "One that is not only highly survivable and able to issue a devastating blow against any adversary under any scenario but that is also capable of conducting effective limited nuclear operations in a controlled fashion while maintaining the ability to escalate to full-scale war if necessary."

Colby made a similar argument in a 2018 piece written in *Foreign Affairs* titled "If You Want Peace, Prepare for Nuclear War," published just a few months after he left the first Trump administration, where he led the development of the 2018 National Defense Strategy.

"Washington's task is clear. It must demonstrate to Moscow and Beijing that any attempt to use force against U.S. friends and allies would likely fail and would certainly result in costs and risks well out of proportion to whatever they might gain," Colby wrote. "'This requires conventional military power, but it also means having the right strategy and weapons to fight a limited nuclear war and come out on top."

— Dave DeCamp is News Editor of Antiwar.com where this piece originally appeared.



As Sentinel ICBM Costs Skyrocket, Air Force Hosts Photo Op

At Vandenberg Space Force Base in California September 14, the Pentagon trotted out for the cameras the first full-scale model of the planned Sentinel intercontinental ballistic missile (ICBM). While little more than a photo op, General Dale White, the Director of Pentagon's Critical Major Weapon Systems in Arlington, Virginia, called the demonstration a "milestone."

Sentinel is the missile the Air Force plans to put into 400 newly built underground silos spread around F. E. Warren Air Force Base in Wyoming, Malmstrom Air Force Base in Montana, and Minot Air Force Base in North Dakota. The missile is intended to replace today's 400 Minuteman III ICBMs. *Stars and Stripes* reports that the Air Force has said the massive project of replacing the current missiles "is expected to take well into the later part of the century," or around 50 years. Air Force contractors intend to build new underground missile silos, new underground launch control centers (where personnel try to stay awake while maintaining launch readiness), and replace hundreds of miles of buried cables that connect the weapons to their controllers.

In July 2024, the Pentagon's estimated total costs for the Sentinel program (not including warheads) was $141 billion in constant 2020 dollars, which was 81% (or $63 billion) above the program's first estimate of $78 billion. The estimated life cycle cost of the Sentinel program was estimated then to be $260 billion, but is undoubtedly higher today.

Meanwhile, according to the ICBM Act, sponsored by Senator Ed Markey (D-Mass), the National Nuclear Security Administration which builds U.S. H-bombs, is developing a new replacement ICBM warhead for the Sentinel, the W87–1, and is expanding plutonium production for the warhead's cores, costing at least $14 billion and $18 billion, respectively.

Gen. James Cartwright, former Vice-Chair of the Joint Chiefs of Staff and former Commander of U.S. Strategic Command, wrote, with former Secretary of Defense William Perry, "[T]he greatest danger is not a Russian bolt but a U.S. blunder — that we might accidentally stumble into nuclear war. As we make decisions about which weapons to buy, we should use this simple rule: If a nuclear weapon increases the risk of accidental war and is not needed to deter an intentional attack, we should not build it.... Certain nuclear weapons, such as ... the [intercontinental ballistic missile], carry higher risks of accidental war that, fortunately, we no longer need to bear. We are safer without these expensive weapons, and it would be foolish to replace them." (*Washington Post*, Nov. 16, 2017)

— *Stars and Stripes*, Sept. 14, 2026; the Congressional "ICBM Act"

12 Democrats Warn of "Massively Corrupt" Golden Dome Missile Defense Plans

A dozen Senate and House Democrats sent a letter to Defense Secretary Pete Hegseth July 8th, calling the proposed Golden Dome missile defense program "a corrupt waste of taxpayers" dollars that, like its earlier versions, can't work.

"[P]lans for Golden Dome could make it prohibitively expensive, operationally ineffective, massively corrupt, and detrimental to U.S. and global security by igniting a nuclear arms race with Russia and China," the letter said. "We are concerned that Golden Dome will be much more effective at wasting taxpayer dollars than countering missile attacks. We urge you to rein in this dangerous plan."

Led by Senators Ed Markey, D-Mass., and Jeff Merkley, D-Ore., and Reps. John Garamendi, D-Calif., and Don Beyer, D-Virg., the letter warned that, "Estimates by the Congressional Budget Office [are] that the system could cost up to $542 billion to complete [over the next 20 years], more than three times the cost that the Trump administration projected."

To save some money, Montana Republican Senator Steve Daines has proposed a federal exemption from the 1969 National Environmental Policy Act (NEPA), whose requirements apply to major government construction projects.

Environmental protection is the function of NEPA, but meeting its requirements would slow and vastly increase the cost of replacing the 400 underground missile silos, their 40 underground launch control centers, and hundreds of miles of buried cables that connect missiles to controllers.

Senator Daines is a long-standing member of the ICBM lobby — senators with Minuteman missiles in their states. He has worked strenuously to create support for the dangerous, destabilizing U.S. land-based missiles, offering an amendment to the must-pass military appropriations bill that would exempt the Air Force from NEPA compliance.

Congress may lawfully exempt the Golden Dome plan and any other Pentagon project from NEPA requirements if Sec. Hegseth declares that "it is critical to national security," or "is necessary for national defense." Under NEPA rules, Hegseth must inform Congress of the reasons for any exemption, but the reasons may be classified "secret" if he determines secrecy is "necessary for reasons of national security." ***—JML***