

Nuclear Cruise Missiles: Asset or Liability?

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Analysis on Effective Policy Responses to Weapons-Related Security Threats

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The future of U.S. and Russian nuclear cruise missiles is at an inflection point. Russia's alleged testing of a ground-launched cruise missile has jeopardized not only the 1987 Intermediate-Range Nuclear Forces Treaty, but other bilateral nuclear agreements as well, adding further strain to the U.S.-Russian relationship. The U.S. allegation and Moscow's three countercharges should be resolved with the help of the treaty's Special Verification Commission, which was explicitly designed to deal with compliance issues. But the two countries need to take a broader look at nuclear cruise missiles. New strategic cruise missiles are part of an unaffordable drive by Washington and Moscow to simultaneously modernize all three legs of their strategic arsenals. Given the increasingly marginal role that nuclear cruise missiles play in ensuring a U.S.-Russian balance and their destabilizing impact when deployed by emerging nuclear powers such as Pakistan, it is time to consider doing away with them entirely.

HIGHLIGHTS

- Nuclear-armed cruise missiles played an important, although subordinate, role in strategic deterrence during the latter years of the Cold War, compensating for the increasing vulnerability of nuclear-armed bombers trying to penetrate enemy air defenses.
- The deterrent role of these nuclear systems in the post-Cold War order has been steadily declining.
- The 1987 Intermediate-Range Nuclear Forces (INF) Treaty eliminated all ground-launched cruise missiles (GLCMs) in U.S. and Russian arsenals.
- Both countries committed to removing all nuclear sea-launched cruise missiles (SLCMs) from ships and submarines under the 1991-1992 Presidential Nuclear Initiatives.
- The bomber leg of the nuclear triad, relying heavily on air-launched cruise missiles (ALCMs) for penetrating hostile air space, has been declining in importance relative to the ballistic missile legs.
- The role of nuclear weapons in U.S. military doctrine has also been shrinking.
- Three of four INF Treaty compliance issues involve concerns about nuclear cruise missiles.
- The budgetary demands of U.S. nuclear modernization programs argue for pruning expensive niche capabilities.
 - The Pentagon seeks to spend up to \$30 billion on a new nuclear ALCM, a largely redundant weapon in light of plans for new bomber and ballistic missile legs of the triad.
- The GLCM ban on systems of INF Treaty-range should be extended to nuclear-tipped ALCMs and SLCMs.
 - U.S. advantages in nuclear-tipped ALCMs would be exchanged for Russia giving up its remaining nuclear SLCMs and its apparent interest in redeploying GLCMs, improving prospects for lowering aggregate nuclear warhead levels.
 - A U.S.-Russian ban would increase prospects for halting the destabilizing growth of nuclear cruise missile arsenals among other nuclear-weapon states.

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