

Congressional hearings reveal “no military requirement” for new low-yield weapons

Authored by Maggie Tennis on Wed, 2017-03-15 11:10

Witnesses with military, policy and technical expertise all rejected the notion of a “military requirement” for new [low-yield weapons](#) in a series of hearings before the House and Senate Armed Services Committees March 8 and March 9. This evident agreement among experts from a range of positions and backgrounds should demonstrate to Congress that there is little credible argument for the additional development of low-yield nuclear weapons, despite language in a December 2016 [Defense Science Board report](#) recommending the development of such weapons.

The Defense Science Board is an advisory body for the U.S. Department of Defense on scientific and technical issues. The December 2016 report, titled “Seven Defense Priorities for the New Administration,” remains vague on the issue of low-yield weapons, but does state the need for a “more flexible nuclear enterprise that could produce, if needed, a rapid, tailored nuclear option for limited use” and efforts to examine additional “lower-yield, primary-only options.” The United States currently possesses a variety of warheads with low-yields, including the [B61 gravity bomb](#).

However, at a [March 9 hearing](#) before the House Armed Services Committee, three members of the Board walked back the report’s veiled recommendation to develop additional low-yield weapons. The witnesses were Michael Anastasio, former director of the Los Alamos National Laboratory, Miriam John, former vice president of Sandia's California Laboratory, and William LaPlante, vice president of the Intelligence Portfolio in the National Security Engineering Center and former assistant secretary of the Air Force.

[Joint testimony](#) submitted by the three Board members made no reference to this type of weapon. When explicitly asked about the development of tactical and low-yield nuclear weapons by Representative John Garamendi (D-Cal.), John denied that the Board had made any such recommendation. She clearly stated that there is “no military requirement right now” for additional low-yield or tactical nuclear weapons. In response to a question from Garamendi inquiring after the ability of our current low-yield capability to meet future military requirements, John responded, “right now, there is no requirement for something more.”

House Armed Services Committee. General John Hyten, Commander of the U.S. Strategic Command, **Congressional Hearings Reveal “no military requirement” for new low-yield weapons** Published with Arms Control Association (https://www.armscontrol.org) Chief of Naval Operations and Vice Chief of Staff for the U.S. Air Force, respectively, to testify on the military requirements of the U.S. nuclear deterrent.

Garamendi asked the witnesses if they believe there is a military requirement for “new tactical or new low-yield strategic weapons.” Without disclosing classified details, Hyten responded that the current U.S. force structure already possesses the capability to provide a “variety of options to respond to any numbers of threats.” Selva stated that, at present, there is no military requirement for new warheads.

Hyten emphasized his fundamental disagreement with the term “tactical nuclear weapon.” He said, “I believe that anybody that employs a nuclear weapon in the world has created a strategic effect, and all nuclear weapons are strategic.”

In response to another question from Garamendi about the purpose of tactical nuclear weapons on dual-capable tactical aircraft in Europe, Selva said, “the stated intended purpose of those weapons is to deter the Russians from using nuclear weapons if they were to attempt escalate a conventional war.” Selva agreed with Hyten’s stated opinion that all nuclear weapons are essentially strategic.

There is clear agreement among experts from both the military and top Defense Department advisors that low-yield nuclear weapons are unnecessary. In fact, throughout three congressional hearings that week on U.S. nuclear posture, only one expert witness, Keith Payne, former assistant secretary of defense for forces policy,, advocated explicitly for expanding the development of these weapons. In a March 8 [hearing](#) before the Senate Armed Services Committee, Payne stated, “I particularly think that the very low-yield option is something we have to consider.” But he did not elaborate or give an explanation for that recommendation.

In the same hearing, Gary Samore, former White House coordinator for arms control and weapons of mass destruction under the Obama administration, disagreed, and said he didn’t see “any need for us to develop a new low- yield weapon.” Furthermore, Samore emphasized his concern about the possibility of a European tactical nuclear conflict with Russian to stay “controlled.”

“We don't want to be confronted with a situation in Europe where tactical nuclear weapons are being used. I am very skeptical that that can be controlled. I think there would be extremely high-risk that that would escalate to general nuclear conflict,” he said.

Samore’s comments demonstrate the conflict presented by increased development of low-yield nuclear weapons. What the United States currently has in place in terms of conventional, nuclear and low-yield nuclear weapons amounts to a credible and robust deterrent against the Russians, according to both military and policy experts. The United States has [1,367 deployed strategic warheads and an estimated 500 deployed and nondeployed tactical nuclear warheads](#)—far more than it would ever need to deter or respond to a Russian nuclear attack. Furthermore, it seems unlikely that some NATO allies would respond positively to action to increase the number of tactical nuclear weapons, given widespread disagreement within the alliance over their utility and benefit. For example, in Germany and the Netherlands, civil society organizations and politicians have made repeated calls to remove the B-61 from their territories.

Opening comments from Representative Rick Larsen (D-WA) at the Defense Science Board hearing best illustrate both the danger and lack of clarity surrounding recommendations to expand development of low-yield weapons. He noted the absence of “sufficiently detailed analysis of what the proposals are, whether these proposals are necessary, what alternatives are being considered, what the trade-offs are, what the cost would be, and what the policy implications are.”

Larsen expressed his concern that “new types of nuclear weapons would have significant policy and proliferation implications. Adding new military capability and building new nuclear weapons would be a radical shift, one that Congress – rightly so – has not been willing to approve for nearly 25 years.”

If the objective of low-yield nuclear weapons is truly deterrence, as stated by multiple witnesses, then the United States can meet its requirements with its existing arsenal. Pursuing low-yield nuclear weapons is at best unnecessary, and at worst, risks triggering a low-yield arms race with Russia. The latter would have severe national and global security implications. It would certainly put the United

Congressional hearings reveal “no military requirement” for new low-yield weapons

Published on Arms Control Association (<https://www.armscontrol.org>)

States at an increased risk of nuclear conflict, and could fuel development of low-yield weapons in other countries.

Source URL: <https://www.armscontrol.org/blog/2017-03-15/congressional-hearings-reveal-military-requirement-low-yield-weapons>