

Russia duped again: US signs nuclear reduction treaty while developing new tactical ICBMs

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U.S. looks to non-nuclear weapons to use as 'deterrent'

As the [White House](#) pushes for cuts in the U.S. nuclear arsenal, the Pentagon is developing a weapon to help fill the gap: missiles armed with conventional warheads that could strike anywhere in the world in less than an hour.

U.S. military officials say the intercontinental ballistic missiles, known as Prompt Global Strike weapons, are a necessary new form of deterrence against terrorist networks and other adversaries. As envisioned, the conventional missiles would give the White House a fresh military option to consider in a crisis that would not result in a radioactive mushroom cloud.

The Prompt Global Strike program, which the Pentagon has been developing for several years, is already raising hackles in Moscow, where Russian officials predict it could trigger a nonnuclear arms race and complicate [President Obama's](#) long-term vision of ridding the world of nuclear weapons. U.S. military officials are also struggling to solve a separate major obstacle: the risk that Russia or China could mistake the launch of a conventional Prompt Global Strike missile for a nuclear one.

"World states will hardly accept a situation in which nuclear weapons disappear, but weapons that are no less destabilizing emerge in the hands of certain members of the international community," Russian Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov told reporters Tuesday in Moscow.

The White House says that development of Prompt Global Strike is not affected by [the new Strategic Arms Reduction Treaty \(START\)](#), which Obama and Russian President Dmitry Medvedev are scheduled to sign Thursday in Prague. Analysts say, however, that any conventional ballistic missiles would count the same as nuclear ones under the treaty, which places new limits on each country's stockpile.

Deployment of a conventional ballistic missile is not expected until 2015 at the earliest. But the program has received a recent boost from the Obama administration, which sees the missiles as one cog in an array of defensive and offensive weapons that could ultimately replace nuclear arms.

The administration has asked Congress for \$240 million for next year's Prompt Global Strike development programs, a 45 percent increase from the current budget. The military forecasts a total of \$2 billion in development costs through 2015 -- a relative bargain by Pentagon standards.

After years of preparation, the Air Force is scheduled to perform an initial flight test of a prototype next month.

"Capabilities like an adaptive missile defense shield, conventional warheads with worldwide reach and others that we are developing enable us to reduce the role of nuclear weapons," [Vice President Biden](#) said [in a February speech](#) at the National Defense University. "With these modern capabilities, even with deep nuclear reductions, we will remain undeniably strong."

Nuclear arms have formed the backbone of U.S. deterrence strategy for six decades. Although the strategy worked during the Cold War, military leaders say they need other powerful weapons in their arsenal to deter adversaries who assume that the United States would refrain from taking the extreme step of ordering a nuclear strike.

"Deterrence can no longer just be nuclear weapons. It has to be broader," [Marine Gen. James E. Cartwright](#), vice chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff and a leading proponent of Prompt Global Strike, told a conference last month.

Some U.S. military officials say their current nonnuclear options are too limited or too slow. Unlike intercontinental ballistic missiles, which travel at several times the speed of sound, it can take up to 12 hours for cruise missiles to hit faraway targets. Long-range bombers likewise can take many hours to fly into position for a strike.

"Today, unless you want to go nuclear, it's measured in days, maybe weeks" until the military can launch an attack with regular forces, Cartwright said. "That's just too long in the world that we live in." Other military officials said potential scenarios might include the discovery of an imminent plot by terrorists to use a weapon of mass destruction, or indications that an enemy state was preparing to launch a missile attack on a U.S. ally.

The Air Force prototype Prompt Global Strike design is a modified Peacekeeper III intercontinental ballistic missile. If it is successful, the plan is to deploy a handful of the missiles at Vandenberg Air Force Base in California.

The weapons would be overseen by the U.S. Strategic Command, which is responsible for the U.S. nuclear arsenal. [Air Force Gen. Kevin P. Chilton](#), who leads the command, based near Omaha, has said he sees Prompt Global Strike as a niche weapon, not one that could substitute for nuclear arms.

"I look at that as an additional weapon in the quiver of the president to give him options in time of crisis today, in which he maybe only has a nuclear option for a timely response," Chilton told a House committee last month.

Although it is technically simple to replace nuclear warheads on a missile with conventional ones, Prompt Global Strike has been dogged by a significant problem: how to ensure that Russia could tell the difference if a launch occurred.

To alleviate the risk of an accidental Russian nuclear retaliation, the Air Force is developing a conventional, land-based ballistic missile that would fire into space at a much lower altitude than nuclear warheads, something that could be detected by Russian early-warning radar systems. U.S. military officials have also said they might be willing to grant access to Russian inspectors, or warn Moscow about a conventional strike on a third-party target.

The Army is working on a separate design that is not as far along in its development. The Navy had been preparing yet another design -- a conventional version of its submarine-based Trident missile -- but Congress curtailed that program two years ago because of concerns that it was too difficult to distinguish from a nuclear-armed Trident.

Critics acknowledge that the technological hurdles are surmountable. But they say a more basic problem is that taking the nuclear part out of the equation could make it too easy for the White House to order a Prompt Global Strike attack. Intelligence in fast-breaking crises is rarely rock-solid, they note, and could result in a rushed strike on the wrong target.

"People watch '24' and think that's how intelligence comes in," said Jeffrey G. Lewis, director of the

Nuclear Strategy and Nonproliferation Initiative at the New America Foundation. "It's not like the president has his brain cybernetically linked to satellite images."

But proponents of Prompt Global Strike said its primary value would be in adding a level of deterrence to the U.S. nuclear arsenal. "At the end of the day, anybody who would be your adversary walks away thinking, 'If I'm going to do this, I'm going to pay dearly,' " Cartwright said last month. "There just can't be any doubt in their mind."

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