United States Senate

WASHINGTON, DC 20510

November 24, 2026

The Honorable Pete Hegseth
Secretary
U.S. Department of Defense
1400 Defense Pentagon
Washington, DC 20301-1400

Dear Secretary Hegseth,

For decades, senior U.S. defense policymakers from both parties have recognized the insanity of preparing for "limited" nuclear war. Yet, the Department of Defense (DoD) is reportedly drafting a new U.S. nuclear strategy that emphasizes the possible use of "tactical" or lower-yield weapons in a limited war and is developing such weapons for deployment. But rather than enhancing deterrence, new tactical weapons will in fact undermine U.S. security. More nuclear weapons, particularly lower-yield weapons that leaders may perceive to be more "usable," will only increase the risk of a catastrophic nuclear war. Tactical nuclear weapons are the gateway drug to nuclear destruction, and we urge you to drop these plans immediately.

Your classified nuclear strategy review reportedly accepts the long-held notion that the use of high-yield nuclear weapons, which make up most of the U.S. nuclear arsenal, is not advisable or credible as it would invite a massive nuclear attack against the United States in response.[1] We agree. High-yield, strategic nuclear weapons have only one purpose: to deter the use of similar weapons against us. As former Secretary of Defense Robert McNamara put it in a formulation that has stood the test of time: "Nuclear warheads are not military weapons in the traditional sense and therefore serve no military purpose other than to deter one's opponent from their use."[2]

But rather than seeking further reductions of these dangerous and unusable weapons, such as by renewing arms control talks, DoD is developing new lower-yield tactical weapons, which President Trump and U.S. military leaders might view as more usable. "Our view is that we need credible nuclear options," a senior DoD official reportedly said.[3] This is a dangerous

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[1] Gordon Lubold & Dan De Luce, *Pentagon drafting a new U.S. nuclear strategy in case of regional war with China or Russia, sources say*, NBC News (Aug. 5, 2026), https://www.nbcnews.com/politics/national-security/pentagon-drafting-new-us-nuclear-strategy-case-regional-war-china-russ-rcna587370.

[2] Steven E. Miller, *The Utility of Nuclear Weapons and the Strategy of No-First-Use*, Belfer Center for Science and International Affairs (Nov. 15-17, 2002), https://www.belfercenter.org/publication/utility-nuclear-weapons-and-strategy-no-first-use.

[3] Lubold & De Luce, *supra* note 1.

game. The goal of U.S. nuclear policy should be to prevent the use of *all* nuclear weapons, full stop.

If President Trump perceives the use of lower-yield weapons as more credible, their deployment increases the risk of nuclear war. Theories that the use of lower-yield weapons can somehow result in a limited or controlled nuclear war are dangerous and unfounded. As President Trump's first Secretary of Defense, James Mattis, declared in 2018: "I don't think there's any such thing as a 'tactical nuclear weapon.' Any nuclear weapon used at any time is a strategic game changer."[4]

History has already taught us this lesson. During the Cold War, the United States had thousands of tactical nuclear weapons. The Navy had nuclear torpedoes and depth charges; the Army had nuclear artillery and short-range missiles; the Air Force had nuclear air-to-air missiles and multiple types of air-dropped nuclear bombs. In the 1960s, at the height of nuclear excess, the U.S. military even deployed small "backpack nukes"—or Special Atomic Demolition Munitions— designed to be carried by soldiers and dropped behind enemy lines in a "suicide mission," given that the bomb would likely detonate before the soldier could reach safety.[5] The small size and portability of these weapons also made them highly vulnerable to theft. We should consider ourselves lucky that we survived the Cold War without their use or theft.

It eventually dawned on nuclear planners that there is no such thing as limited nuclear war and planning for one was dangerous folly. In 1984, President Ronald Reagan famously declared that "[a] nuclear war cannot be won and must never be fought."[6] In 1991, President George H.W. Bush announced plans to eliminate virtually all U.S. tactical nuclear weapons, including all tactical nuclear weapons deployed on navy ships.[7] Thousands of weapons were subsequently retired, and most were eventually dismantled.[8] Since then, the United States has reduced its tactical nuclear weapons by more than 90 percent from its 1991 level.[9]

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[4] Aaron Mehta, *Mattis: No such thing as a 'tactical' nuclear weapon, but new cruise missile needed*, Defense News (Feb. 6, 2018), https://www.defensenews.com/space/2018/02/06/mattis-no-such-thing-as-a-tactical-nuclear-weapon-but-new-cruise-missile-needed/.

[5] Paul Srubas, *The horrifying purpose of Special Atomic Demolition Munition units: 'We all knew it was a one-way mission, a suicide mission'*, Army Times (Jan. 14, 2019), https://www.armytimes.com/news/your-army/2019/01/14/the-horrifying-purpose-of-special-atomic-demolition-munition-units-we-all-knew-it-was-a-one-way-mission-a-suicide-mission/.

[6] Ronald Reagan, Address Before a Joint Session of the Congress on the State of the Union (Jan. 25, 1984), https://www.reaganlibrary.gov/archives/speech/address-joint-session-congress-state-union-january-1984.

[7] George H.W. Bush, Address to the Nation on Reducing United States and Soviet Nuclear Weapons (Sept. 27, 1991), https://www.presidency.ucsb.edu/documents/address-the-nation-reducing-united-states-and-soviet-nuclear-weapons?utm_source=chatgpt.com.

[8] Congressional Research Service, Nonstrategic Nuclear Weapons, R.L. 32572, at 13-14 (Mar. 7, 2022), https://www.everycrsreport.com/reports/RL32572.html.

[9] U.S. Department of State, *Transparency in the U.S. Nuclear Weapons Stockpile* (July 19, 2024), https://2021-2025.state.gov/transparency-in-the-u-s-nuclear-weapons-stockpile-2/.

But we did not eliminate all our tactical nuclear weapons. The United States kept tactical B61 bombs deployed at NATO bases in Europe and Air Launched Cruise Missiles (ALCMs) on bombers, both of which have lower-yield options.[10] And, unfortunately, President Trump has been reinvigorating the nation's nuclear tactical posture. In 2019, the first Trump administration deployed the W76-2 lower-yield warhead on Trident submarines.[11] Now, the Administration is seeking to replace the ALCM with the Long-Range Standoff Weapon (LRSO) and build a new nuclear Sea-Launched Cruise Missile (SLCM-N), to replace the original that was taken out of deployment following President George H.W. Bush's 1991 nuclear initiatives.[12] The Biden administration had sought to cancel the SLCM-N, but the Republican-controlled Congress directed that development to continue.[13]

The Trump administration has also initiated the Rapid Capabilities Program, which is developing new "flexible deterrence options across a wide range of conflict scenarios" on an accelerated schedule.[14] This program seeks to reduce the timeline for fielding new atomic weapons from 10 years to within three to five.[15] New tactical weapons may be developed in this program and elsewhere in the National Nuclear Security Administration. Senate staff recently requested a DoD briefing on the Rapid Capabilities Program and were denied. Other congressional efforts to learn more about this program have been cancelled or delayed.

To help us and the public better understand the Trump administration's nuclear weapons policy, including plans for new tactical nuclear weapons, please respond to the following questions in writing by December 15, 2026:

1. What is the status of DoD's new nuclear strategy review?
   a. Who directed the review, when did it begin, and which DoD offices and other federal agencies are participating?
   b. When will the review be completed, and which officials will approve its recommendations?
   c. What portions of the review, if any, will be made public? Why does DoD intend to keep the remainder classified?

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[10] Hans M. Kristensen, Matt Korda, Eliana Johns, & Mackenzie Knight-Boyle, *United States nuclear weapons, 2026*, Bulletin of the Atomic Scientists (Mar. 12, 2026), https://thebulletin.org/premium/2026-03/united-states-nuclear-weapons-2026/.

[11] *Id*.

[12] U.S. Air Force Nuclear Weapons Center, Long Range Standoff Weapon, https://www.afnwc.af.mil/Weapon-Systems/Long-Range-Standoff-Weapon/ (last visited Nov. 4, 2026).

[13] Congressional Research Service, Nuclear-Armed Sea-Launched Cruise Missile (SLCM-N), IF12084, at 1-2 (Jan. 8, 2026), https://www.congress.gov/crs_external_products/IF/PDF/IF12084/IF12084.14.pdf.

[14] Sandia National Laboratories, Rapid Capabilities for Nuclear Deterrence, https://www.sandia.gov/missions/nuclear-weapons/rapid-capabilities/ (last visited Nov. 4, 2026).

[15] *Id*.

2. What role does the Administration envision for tactical or lower-yield nuclear weapons in U.S. nuclear strategy?
   a. Under what circumstances does DoD contemplate the use of these weapons, including in a regional conflict with Russia or China?
   b. Does DoD believe that the use of tactical or lower-yield nuclear weapons could remain limited without escalating into a broader nuclear war? What evidence or analysis supports that assessment?
   c. How has DoD evaluated the risk that developing or deploying additional lower-yield weapons would increase the likelihood of nuclear use or escalation?

3. What new tactical or lower-yield nuclear weapons is the Administration developing or considering?
   a. Which weapons are being developed or considered under the Rapid Capabilities Program, and what military requirements are they intended to meet?
   b. What additional tactical or lower-yield weapons are being developed or considered by DoD or the National Nuclear Security Administration, including outside the Rapid Capabilities Program?
   c. How would these weapons differ from existing U.S. nuclear capabilities, including the W76-2 warhead, B61 bombs, the Long-Range Standoff Weapon, and the proposed nuclear Sea-Launched Cruise Missile?

4. What are the Administration's plans for developing and deploying these weapons?
   a. What are the estimated development and production costs, current funding levels, and projected deployment dates for each new weapon under consideration?
   b. Which military services and delivery systems would carry these weapons, and where would they be deployed?
   c. Which weapons are expected to be developed or fielded within the Rapid Capabilities Program's accelerated three-to-five-year timeline, and what steps are being taken to ensure their safety and security?

5. What steps is the Administration taking to reduce reliance on tactical nuclear weapons and pursue arms control?
   a. Does the Administration intend to seek new nuclear arms control agreements with Russia or China? If so, when does it expect talks to begin?
   b. Would the Administration seek limits on tactical or lower-yield nuclear weapons as part of those negotiations?
   c. What alternatives to developing additional tactical or lower-yield weapons has DoD considered, including arms control measures or reductions in existing nuclear arsenals?

To better understand your plans in this area, we hereby request a classified briefing on the new nuclear policy review, the Rapid Capabilities Program, and any plans the Administration has for new tactical nuclear weapons.

Any use of nuclear weapons carries with it the high and inescapable risk of escalation into catastrophic nuclear war, which no one would win. The clear firebreak against such a worldwide disaster is to draw a bright line between nuclear weapons and all other weapons. We must strive to keep that firebreak wide and strong. Blurring the line by developing more tactical nuclear weapons is deeply unwise and increases nuclear risk. We urge you to abandon these plans immediately.

Sincerely,

Edward J. Markey
United States Senator

Jeffrey A. Merkley
United States Senator