



February 19, 2020

The Honorable Dr. Mark T. Esper
Secretary of Defense
1000 Defense Pentagon
Washington, D.C. 20301-1000

Dear Secretary Esper,

We write to express our concern about the recent decision to begin fielding the W76-2 low-yield nuclear submarine-launched ballistic missile warhead, a decision we do not support. We ask that you respond to several questions regarding the implication of this decision on the United States' efforts to extend the New START treaty with Russia.

As we have previously written, we remain skeptical of the ability of a low-yield weapon to effectively deter our adversaries. The stated rationale of fielding a low-yield weapon is to build the capability to respond, in kind, to a Russian first-use of a low-yield weapon. However, the argument that the threat of escalation by degree deters further escalation undermines decades of U.S. leadership to reduce nuclear proliferation among other nations that claim to pursue their own nuclear programs for a deterrent.

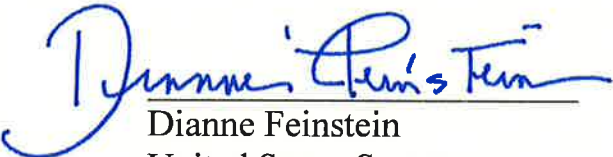
It is inconsistent for the United States to begin fielding new nuclear weapons while we urge other countries not to do so. We should be focusing on diplomatic solutions, and we ask that you urge President Trump to extend New START before it expires next year in order to begin negotiating a successor treaty that addresses U.S. security needs. New START is our only arms control treaty still in effect with Russia, and it provides critical verification, assurance, and transparency that helps avoid a costly arms race.

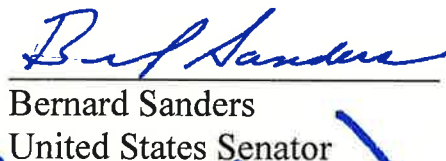
In an effort to better understand the administration's position, we respectfully request that you respond to the following questions related to the fielding of the low-yield nuclear warheads and New START. While I would prefer an unclassified response, I understand if you need to respond at a higher classification level to ensure your answers are accurate and complete.

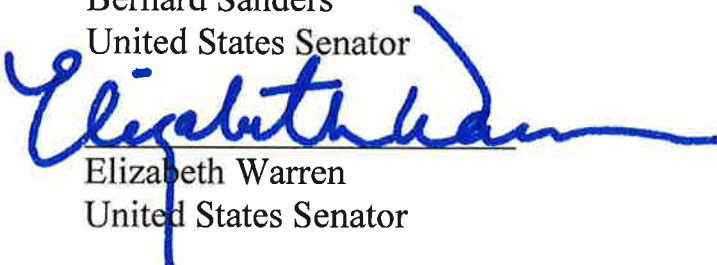
1. The Department of Energy's FY2018 Stockpile Stewardship and Management Plan said the National Nuclear Security Administration (NNSA) is already working beyond its nominal capacity. What projects in support of the Department of Defense has the NNSA postponed in order to shift focus to the low-yield nuclear warheads?
2. Under what conditions would the United States consider using low-yield nuclear weapons?
3. In the event of a hostile attack, does the United States have the capability to distinguish between an incoming low-yield nuclear weapon versus a conventional one? Do our adversaries have such a capability? What steps are being taken to avoid miscalculation?
4. Is the Department of Defense planning to field strategic delivery vehicles at a level consistent with New START in FY2022 and FY2023?
5. Would strategic delivery vehicles armed with W76-2 low-yield warheads count against New START limits?

Thank you for your attention to this matter, and we look forward to your response.

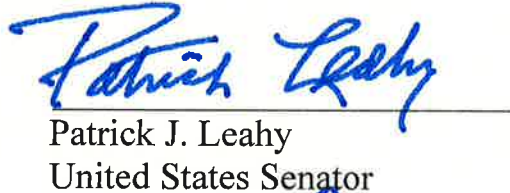
Sincerely,

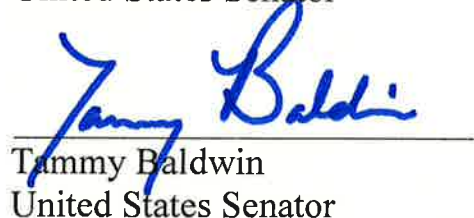

Dianne Feinstein
United States Senator


Bernard Sanders
United States Senator


Elizabeth Warren
United States Senator

DF/rb


Patrick J. Leahy
United States Senator


Tammy Baldwin
United States Senator