

Austin, Milley 'not consulted' on Navy directive to cancel nuclear cruise missile

BY LARA SELIGMAN | 06/10/2021 11:35 AM EDT

Top Pentagon leaders told Congress on Thursday that they were not consulted on a directive by the acting Navy secretary to cancel a new nuclear cruise missile, saying such a decision should not be made outside of an upcoming formal weapons review.

"I am not familiar with the memo nor was I consulted, but as soon as we're done here I'll go find that memo and get consulted," Gen. Mark Milley, chair of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, told members of the Senate Armed Services Committee.

Defense Secretary Lloyd Austin agreed with Sen. [Deb Fischer](#) (R-Neb.), who raised the question, that issuing such a directive without consulting department leaders, combatant commanders or other agencies is "not the right way to make decisions about nuclear policy."

Background: The Pentagon's budget plan for fiscal 2022 [requests \\$5.2 million](#) in research and development funding for a sea-launched cruise missile capable of carrying a nuclear warhead, a new weapon that was initiated by the Trump administration. The department is also setting aside \$10 million for another Trump administration effort, the W76-2 low-yield warhead that is now outfitted on submarines.

The decision to retain funding for these new weapons was made despite President Joe Biden's stated opposition to new nuclear weapons, including the two Trump efforts. It sparked an outcry from arms control advocates and the progressive wing of the Democratic Party.

Navy memo leaked: Yet just days after the budget's release, on June 4, acting Navy Secretary Thomas Harker sent a [memo](#) calling on the Navy to defund the nuclear cruise missile in fiscal 2023, among other directives. The news was [first reported](#) by Aviation Week.

When questioned by Fischer about the directive, both Austin and Milley said they had not seen that memo. Austin said it "has to be pre-decisional" because the department has not yet begun a planned review of its nuclear programs.

Fischer noted that Harker has not been confirmed by the Senate, and said she found it "very concerning" that he is "making a decision like this outside of any review process without analysis or input from OSD policy, from nuclear matters, the Joint Chiefs or [U.S. Strategic Command], and without talking to other agencies or having it seems any discussions with our allies."

Harker was appointed to the Navy Department during the Trump administration. The Biden administration has yet to name its nominee for Navy secretary.

A Navy official, speaking on condition of anonymity to discuss internal planning, said the memo "is an early, early, early internal planning document" for the fiscal 2023 budget, and would not have been circulated around the building yet.

Paul McLeary contributed to this report.