Negative: ICBMs

***Resolved: The United States federal government should considerably decrease its military commitments***

**By “Coach Vance” Trefethen**

Summary: Affirmative removes Intercontinental Ballistic Missiles (ICBMs – land-based missiles that fire nuclear bombs a long distance around the globe to a foreign target) from the US military arsenal. Their plan is to rely on submarine-launched nuclear missiles and Air Force bombers instead. Currently the US relies on all 3 of these delivery vehicles for our nuclear weapons, a strategy known as the “nuclear triad.” This is a Negative brief against that plan.

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Negative: ICBMs

COUNTERPLAN – Missile Defense instead

Instead of banning ICBMs, build missile defense so we can protect them from incoming attack. Solves the “hair trigger” issue – we don’t have to fire them off immediately

Peter V. Pry 2020 (*director of the Task Force on National and Homeland Security, served as chief of staff on the Congressional EMP Commission, and on the staffs of the House Armed Service Committee and the CIA*) 6 Oct 2020 “Loss of ICBMs: Biden will almost certainly abolish this indispensable deterrent” <https://www.washingtontimes.com/news/2020/oct/6/loss-of-icbms-biden-will-almost-certainly-abolish-/>

Instead of banning U.S. ICBMs, critics should support space-based missile defenses and terrestrial Phalanx or Iron Dome defenses for ICBM silos to make unnecessary launch-on-tactical-warning, and ease unwarranted fears about an alleged nuclear “hair-trigger.” U.S. ICBM critics fear the wrong ICBMs. While [U.S. ICBMs](https://www.washingtontimes.com/topics/us-icbms/) exist to prevent war — Russia, China and North Korea favor ICBMs because they are ideal for nuclear blackmail and surprise attack.

How much would it cost? $10.3 billion/year + $380 million over 5 years

[Kingston Reif](https://www.armscontrol.org/about/kingston_reif) 2019 (D*irector for disarmament and threat reduction policy at Arms Control Association, a non-profit advocacy group)* <https://www.armscontrol.org/factsheets/usmissiledefense>

Since President Trump’s inauguration, the administration has vowed to expand national and regional missile defense systems of every kind, and Congress has supported these efforts. In fiscal year 2018, Congress [approved](https://www.armscontrol.org/act/2018-05/news/congress-boosts-missile-defense-spending) $11.5 billion for the Missile Defense Agency, an increase of $3.6 billion, or 46 percent, from the Trump administration’s May 2017 initial budget request. The appropriation is the largest Congress has ever provided for the agency after adjusting for inflation. Congress approved another big increase for [fiscal year 2019](https://www.appropriations.senate.gov/news/defense-labor-hhs-education-minibus-conference-report-filed), approving $10.3 billion for the agency, an increase of $1.4 billion above the budget request of $9.9 billion. Notably, the fiscal year 2020 request [seeks](https://www.armscontrol.org/act/2019-04/news/us-seeks-new-space-based-capabilities) $380 million over the next five years to develop and test by 2023 a prototype space-based laser weapon to destroy ICBMs during their boost and midcourse phases of flight.

Funding for the Counterplan comes from cutting the US Dept. of Education by 18% (18% of $64 billion = $11.5 billion)

US Dept. of Education 2019. “FISCAL YEAR 2020 BUDGET SUMMARY”. <https://www2.ed.gov/about/overview/budget/budget20/summary/20summary.pdf>

The President’s fiscal year 2020 Budget Request (the Request) includes $64.0 billion in new discretionary Budget Authority for the Department of Education, a $7.1 billion or a 10.0 percent reduction below the fiscal year 2019 appropriation.

INHERENCY

1. Nuclear forces are being reduced in Status Quo

Since end of Cold War, US and Russia have both greatly reduced nuclear weapons

RAND Corporation 2014 (nonprofit institution that helps improve policy and decisionmaking through research and analysis; researched by Lauren Caston, Robert S. Leonard, Christopher A. Mouton, Chad J. R. Ohlandt, S. Craig Moore, Raymond E. Conley, Glenn Buchan under contract with the US Air Force) published in 2014, no month given in the publication date. “The Future of the U.S. Intercontinental Ballistic Missile Force” <https://www.rand.org/content/dam/rand/pubs/monographs/MG1200/MG1210/RAND_MG1210.pdf>

With the end of the Soviet Union, the intensity of the Cold War competition in strategic nuclear forces at the highest levels has diminished, and, although both Russia and the United States continue to maintain strategic forces that are much larger than those of other current nuclear powers, these numbers are greatly reduced from Cold War days. Both the United States and Russia have also continued to modernize their strategic forces, although much less aggressively than during the Cold War, while seeking to maintain a generally stable nuclear balance. They have also continued to reduce the overall size of their strategic forces through a series of nuclear arms control agreements aimed at maintaining the same overall stable balance between them at lower force levels

HARMS / SIGNIFICANCE

1. “Hair trigger” / “Launch on warning” false alarm problem – isn’t a problem for US ICBMs

**If ICBMs are on a “hair trigger” launch policy, it means that you will launch them as soon as you suspect the enemy attack is in progress (= “launch on warning”) before anything has hit you yet, because you don’t want the incoming attack to destroy your ICBMs before you get a chance to use them. The risk is: What if the report of an attack is a mistake, a false alarm, a false blip on the radar? Too late, you’ve already launched your ICBMs and started a nuclear war by mistake – they can’t be called back. Fortunately, this is not a problem because…**

ICBMs are not on hair-trigger alert and there are lots of new layers of safeguards to prevent improper use

Gen. C. Robert Kehler 2019 (retired US Air Force general; f*ormer Commander, U.S. Strategic Command*) 20 Aug 2019 “The U.S. Needs a New ICBM Now” (brackets in original) <https://www.realcleardefense.com/articles/2019/08/20/the_us_needs_a_new_icbm_now_114680.html>

**ICBMs have not outlived their usefulness nor does having them present more security risks than benefits.** Critics contend that ICBMs are “Cold War relics” and that they increase the likelihood of miscalculation because they are “vulnerable” and on “hair trigger alert”. Neither assertion is valid. ICBMs remain an essential contributor to deterrence as a key element of both a day-to-day dyad and a fully generated triad. And, as a U.S. Department of State report during the Obama Administration emphasized, “U.S. nuclear forces are not on hair-trigger alert.”[[3]](http://www.nipp.org/2019/08/16/kehler-c-robert-the-u-s-needs-a-new-icbm-now/%22%20%5Cl%20%22_edn3) Layers of safeguards are in place to prevent unauthorized or inadvertent use of all U.S. nuclear weapons with ICBMs among the safest and most secure. The U.S. has revised contingency plans, adjusted weapon loading, refined response procedures, upgraded warning systems, and implemented other steps to increase decision time to mitigate any “use or lose” pressures on decision makers.

US ICBMs aren’t on hair trigger/launch-on-warning status: US policy is to wait until actual detonations are confirmed before launching ICBMs

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Although the United States has had a technical capability to launch under attack, policy direction has been to posture forces so as not to rely on it. Robert Bell, senior director for defense policy and arms control at the National Security Council, made this explicit in 1997: “Our policy is to confirm that we are under nuclear attack with actual detonations before retaliating.”

2. A/T “Survivability” problem

**This is the AFF’s concern that land-based ICBMs are vulnerable to being wiped out by a surprise attack and wouldn’t survive to be used if a nuclear war broke out, rendering them useless. That’s not the case because…**

Survivability of US ICBMs isn’t a problem under current threat scenarios

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Today, only Russia is capable of attacking U.S. ICBMs, and, even in this situation, an attack would require a substantial fraction of Russian reentry vehicles (RVs) under the New START ceiling. Thus, the continuing vulnerability of U.S. ICBMs to a Russian preemptive strike may not be of nearly as much concern as it was during the Cold War, especially since the United States and Russia are no longer implacable enemies. Basing ICBMs in current silos is survivable against all other potential nuclear adversaries. In particular, China is now incapable of such an attack, and will likely remain so for the foreseeable future.

Even if they were all destroyed on the ground (didn’t survive) that’s still good: It would waste hundreds of their nukes in the attempt, and the cost of doing so would make nuclear attack less likely

Gen. C. Robert Kehler 2019 (retired US Air Force general; f*ormer Commander, U.S. Strategic Command*) 20 Aug 2019 “The U.S. Needs a New ICBM Now” <https://www.realcleardefense.com/articles/2019/08/20/the_us_needs_a_new_icbm_now_114680.html>

The ICBM force introduces a difficult set of problems to enemy attack planning, and thus helps to deter enemy attack. Russia remains the only potential adversary that could attack the U.S. homeland in a massive way. To do so, Russian planners would have to contend with 400 operationally deployed ICBMs, in addition to the other two triad legs. They could ignore the U.S. ICBM force (assuming it would be launched on warning) or try to destroy it on the ground before it could be launched—employing their most capable weapons to attack America’s single-warhead ICBMs. But either approach would carry the enormous risks and potential costs for Moscow that help to ensure the deterrence of any such attack.

3. False justification responses

Budgetary pressures and “aging machinery” are not valid justifications for deciding ICBM policy

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Although the ongoing DoD Service Life Extension Programs (SLEPs) hope to enable the Minuteman III force, which has been in service since the 1970s, to serve until approximately 2030, it is important to begin thinking now about the necessary research, development, and testing of a new missile, as it could easily take a decade or more to field a new system. Procurement and fielding of complete systems can take equally as long. As called for in the NPR, policymakers should already be considering and assessing alternatives for the next-generation ICBM, understanding that adjustments to the U.S. nuclear force posture should be a deliberate policy choice rather than a consequence of budgetary pressures or aging machinery.

Cost isn’t a problem: The US can afford to modernize its ICBM force and the price is well worth it

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**The U.S. can afford to modernize its ICBM force.** Excessive cost is frequently cited as a reason to delay or reject ICBM modernization. Triad and nuclear C3 [command, control, and communications] modernization costs money, but the programs are clearly affordable given the high priority of nuclear deterrence and the consequences of its failure. As General Mark Milley, then-Chief of Staff of the Army, has said: “The only thing more expensive than deterrence is actually fighting a war, and the only thing more expensive than fighting a war is fighting one and losing one.” Recapitalizing the triad should not be a competition for resources among its legs (nor a competition with conventional force needs); rather it should be a recognition of the synergistic contribution of all three legs (and nuclear C3), the top national priority of nuclear deterrence, and an appreciation that investment in nuclear modernization represents a small fraction of defense spending (between 6-7% of the DOD budget at its height according to a variety of open sources). There is room in the annual defense budget for ICBM modernization; if not, Congress should fund the triad and nuclear C3 modernization separately as a national program outside the regular defense budget.

4. A/T “Not needed today / Cold War is over”

ICBMs are just as critical today as they were during the Cold War

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In my view, delaying or deferring ICBM modernization threatens the enduring value of the triad and risks compromising the foundation of U.S. strategic deterrence and allied assurance. Land-based ICBMs remain as critical today for these objectives as they were during the Cold War, and the need to retain and recapitalize them without delay is based on the sound strategic contributions they make.

SOLVENCY

A/T “Submarines are a good replacement”

Subs are too vulnerable, there are only 4 of them at sea at any time, not as responsive, and not suited for many limited nuclear operations

Peter V. Pry 2020 (*director of the Task Force on National and Homeland Security, served as chief of staff on the Congressional EMP Commission, and on the staffs of the House Armed Service Committee and the CIA*) 6 Oct 2020 “Loss of ICBMs: Biden will almost certainly abolish this indispensable deterrent” <https://www.washingtontimes.com/news/2020/oct/6/loss-of-icbms-biden-will-almost-certainly-abolish-/> (Note: MIRV = multiple independently-targeted re-entry vehicles. It means you fire one missile and it can drop 3 or 4 bombs on different targets)

SSBNs [nuclear subs] are far more vulnerable than ICBMs to surprise attack, as two-thirds of U.S. missile submarines are berthed at two ports, where they could be destroyed by nuclear or conventional weapons, highly tempting targets as every submarine sunk eliminates 20 strategic missiles and 60-80 warheads. SSBNs at sea are supposed to be “invulnerable.” Assumptions about “invulnerability” are often the first fatalities in war. Surprise attack is the nightmare scenario — most likely to happen because it maximizes U.S. vulnerabilities — against which 400 ICBMs that can launch-on-tactical-warning are sentinels. Surprise attack would find at sea just 4 U.S. SSBNs — none responsive as ICBMs. Most submarine missiles are MIRVed with 3-4 warheads, unsuited for many limited nuclear operations. SSBNs are designed never to be used, a survivable reserve at sea intended to deter attack on U.S. cities.

Submarines may be increasingly vulnerable

Constance Baroudos 2016 (M.A.; *Vice President of the Lexington Institute, a public policy think tank*) 18 Feb 2016 “New ICBMs: Necessary to Secure the American Strategic Deterrent” <https://www.lexingtoninstitute.org/new-icbms-necessary-to-secure-the-american-strategic-deterrent/>

While nuclear submarines are undetectable in the ocean today, a technological breakthrough could occur that would make the oceans less opaque – especially with the fast pace at which technology now develops. The sea-based leg might be severely weakened and could be at risk of being destroyed by conventional forces. Thus, the land leg would increase in significance as would any remaining bombers. Finally, eliminating ICBMs may motivate potential adversaries to try even harder to develop the capability to locate nuclear submarines underwater to put America’s second-strike capability at risk.

A/T “Aircraft / bombers are a good replacement”

Slow, vulnerable to air defenses, could all be destroyed in surprise attack

Peter V. Pry 2020 (*director of the Task Force on National and Homeland Security, served as chief of staff on the Congressional EMP Commission, and on the staffs of the House Armed Service Committee and the CIA*) 6 Oct 2020 “Loss of ICBMs: Biden will almost certainly abolish this indispensable deterrent” <https://www.washingtontimes.com/news/2020/oct/6/loss-of-icbms-biden-will-almost-certainly-abolish-/>

Bombers can deliver nuclear or conventional weapons and can be recalled. But they need to be generated, are the slowest delivery system, might not penetrate air defenses, and could all be destroyed on their 3 bases with just a few warheads in a surprise attack.

Bomber aircraft are vulnerable

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There are three bases for nuclear-capable bombers and two bases for ballistic missile submarines (SSBNs); that makes a total of five targets on the American homeland. If an adversary were to launch a nuclear attack, some SSBNs would be safe at sea carrying up to 24 Trident missiles with multiple warheads on each and could launch an attack on an enemy or combination of enemies. However, bombers are not undetectable and can be destroyed with conventional forces, thus the air leg would be vulnerable and possibly compromised.

Bombers aren’t on alert – that makes ICBMs even more critical

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ICBMs have additional importance today that wasn’t envisioned during the Cold War. Not only is today’s triad far smaller than during the Cold War, it is configured differently than it was at that time. At the end of the Cold War, President George H. W. Bush removed heavy bombers and supporting aerial refueling tankers from their daily nuclear commitment, which means on a day-to-day basis the bomber leg of the triad is no longer loaded and poised to take off with nuclear weapons. In essence, the U.S. now relies on a relatively small dyad of ICBMs and SSBNs to meet daily deterrence requirements. The U.S. still has the classic nuclear triad with all its benefits, but only when the president orders the bombers to be readied for nuclear use (“generated” in nuclear parlance). ICBMs and SSBNs together have allowed the bombers and tankers to be released for use by military commanders with great effect in a wide variety of conventional missions. This has raised the importance of ICBMs as a mainstay of deterrence, as a hedge against unforeseen technical problems or geopolitical events, and as an enabler for other operational needs such as adjusting at-sea operations of the SSBN fleet when needed for major submarine maintenance or modernization.

Putting the bombers back on nuclear alert wouldn’t be a good solution either

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Significantly, bombers and tankers re-committed to the day-to-day nuclear deterrence mission would not be available to project conventional military power (an essential role to counter adversaries deploying anti-access strategies); nor would they be available to provide conventional options intended to reduce the role of nuclear weapons and strengthen strategic deterrence below the nuclear threshold.

A/T “Experts advocate abolishing ICBMs”

They’re ignoring history, and their assumptions need to be challenged

Peter V. Pry 2020 (*director of the Task Force on National and Homeland Security, served as chief of staff on the Congressional EMP Commission, and on the staffs of the House Armed Service Committee and the CIA*) 6 Oct 2020 “Loss of ICBMs: Biden will almost certainly abolish this indispensable deterrent” <https://www.washingtontimes.com/news/2020/oct/6/loss-of-icbms-biden-will-almost-certainly-abolish-/>

President Clinton’s former Secretary of Defense, William Perry, and many other Democrat defense professionals likely to influence a Biden administration, vociferously advocate banning ICBMs. (See the report “Rethinking Land-Based Nuclear Missiles” Union of Concerned Scientists: June 22, 2020). Democrats now subscribe to nuclear deterrence minimalism, which theory assumes that only a small number of SSBNs are needed to deter nuclear war, and that nothing can go wrong with their warheads, missiles or the submarines — assumptions which defy all of military history. The nuclear Triad was invented by the Great Generation who survived and won World War II where, for the Allies at the beginning, confidently propounded pre-war military theories and sophisticated weapons went wrong. France’s “impregnable” Maginot Line was rendered obsolete by Nazi Germany’s Blitzkrieg strategy. Allied infantry and tanks were overwhelmed and outclassed by Axis panzer divisions. Battleships were rendered obsolete by aircraft carriers at Pearl Harbor. U.S. torpedoes did not work, but dive bombers miraculously saved the day at Midway. As in World War II, a lot can go wrong with the best laid plans and weapons in a nuclear World War III.

DISADVANTAGES

1. Lost deterrence

Link: ICBMs (land-based) are the most important weapon in the nuclear Triad (Triad = land-based, bomber aircraft and submarines)

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ICBMs are the most important weapon in the U.S. nuclear Triad — faster, more combat-ready, and more responsive than strategic bombers and missile submarines. Everyday, anytime, in the few minutes required to receive an Emergency Action Message and turn two keys, [U.S. ICBMs](https://www.washingtontimes.com/topics/us-icbms/) can launch 400 of the most powerful, accurate, effective nuclear warheads, delivering them anywhere in 30 minutes or less.

Link: Eliminating ICBMs would weaken deterrence because they provide capabilities other nuclear weapons don’t have

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The ICBM force provides many benefits that other strategic systems do not: they shorten the time needed to execute the president’s response to a nuclear attack, increase the total number of targets an adversary would have to destroy to compromise America’s deterrent, and cannot be wiped out with conventional forces like other nuclear weapons. Eliminating ICBMs would weaken America’s nuclear deterrent that protects its homeland and allies from a nuclear first strike.

Brink: ICBMs are essential to deterrence. Relying on the other 2 (Aircraft and Subs) isn’t enough

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Each leg of the U.S. nuclear triad contributes uniquely to deterrence. Submarines at sea are the most survivable, bombers are the most flexible, and ICBMs are the most responsive. Together, the three legs of the triad provide unparallel support for deterrence; there is not a more effective way to meet our deterrence objectives. As seven other former commanders of United States Strategic Command and I wrote in early 2017: “The combined capabilities of the triad provide the president with the mixture of systems and weapons necessary to hold an adversary’s most valuable targets at risk, with the credibility of an assured response if needed—the essence of deterrence.”

Essential to deterrence: ICBMs provide options not available with other weapons

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ICBMs provide the U.S. with responsive deterrence options that otherwise would not be available. Dispersed in secure underground launch facilities, ICBMs can hold an adversary’s key targets at risk within minutes of a presidential command. While no U.S. nuclear weapon is targeted on another country today (ICBMs are targeted against broad open ocean areas), ICBMs can be retargeted very rapidly in response to emerging crises or warning of attack and can be used singly, in small numbers, or in large options. Single-warhead ICBMs allow planners to adjust quickly to changes in enemy forces or targets. Because ICBMs are continuously under secure control, in a high state of readiness, and have assured connectivity to the president, the U.S. has a prompt response capability that can help deter a wide variety of extreme threats–to include an unlikely, but still possible, surprise nuclear attack.

Impact: National security and nuclear war. Credible deterrence with ICBMs is essential to prevent nuclear attack and uphold US national security

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The U.S. faces far more diverse security problems and uncertainty than it did during the Cold War and the threats are growing, including nuclear. Russia and China seek to change the international order and have aggressively modernized their nuclear arsenals as part of strategies designed to diminish U.S. power and prestige, coerce our allies, and reduce our global influence. North Korea has acquired nuclear weapons and others have expressed interest in pursuing nuclear weapons programs. The great paradox of the nuclear age remains with us; in order to prevent the use of nuclear weapons our deterrence threats must be credible. Along with the rest of the triad, ICBMs continue to provide credible deterrence that ensures our national security as well as the security of our allies and partners.

Impact: ICBMs are essential to preventing nuclear war

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Deterrence is effective because it causes the enemy to fear a massive retaliatory response; ICBMs in particular ensure an adversary’s objectives are beyond reach because they are on alert and cannot be destroyed by conventional forces. Without ICBMs, execution of the president’s response to a nuclear first strike might be delayed and the challenge of disarming America in a surprise attack would be greatly simplified. A new ICBM is an expensive but essential investment that will prevent a potential aggressor from launching a nuclear first strike and ensure these fearsome weapons are never used.

2. Increased threats to the US

Abolishing ICBMs would make it easier for enemies to attack the US, and could motivate new threats

Gen. C. Robert Kehler 2019 (retired US Air Force general; f*ormer Commander, U.S. Strategic Command*) 20 Aug 2019 “The U.S. Needs a New ICBM Now” <https://www.realcleardefense.com/articles/2019/08/20/the_us_needs_a_new_icbm_now_114680.html>

Neither China nor any other rising nuclear-armed adversary can meaningfully threaten the current U.S. ICBM force without a large increase in force structure and improvements in their hard target kill capabilities. However, if the U.S. ICBM force were retired, an enemy’s attack planning against the United States would become dramatically easier; Russia or China could use a relatively small-scale attack force within their current means to strike at the remaining limited number of nuclear-related strategic targets in the U.S. In the absence of U.S. ICBMs, others could be motivated to build such a force as well.

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