

Killing ICBMs

By

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The Arms Control Association (ACA) and the Physicists Coalition to Reduce Nuclear Dangers are [proposing](#) the United States unilaterally cancel the Sentinel intercontinental ballistic missile (ICBM) program, removing 60 percent of the United States' nuclear delivery vehicles. They fear a president might launch America's silo-based ICBMs during a crisis and perhaps even accidentally trigger a nuclear war because of mistaken fears that the nation's missiles are under attack by an adversary.

The recent defense bill passed by Congress [fully supports](#) the Sentinel program. The Strategic Posture Commission [report](#) also supports the replacement of the Minuteman III ICBM, although the commission also recommends the US examine making some portion of the ICBM force mobile. The ACA rejects efforts to make ICBMs more survivable and recommends the elimination of all American ICBMs, a switch from their previous view that the US should keep the 54-year-old Minuteman III as an alternative to Sentinel.

ICBM mobility was reviewed by previous administrations in detail, but due to opposition from environmental groups and disarmament advocates, mobile ICBMs never received the political support needed. In 1977, just after President Jimmy Carter proposed the fielding of 200 mobile MX missiles, two senators, Howard Cannon (D-NV) and Frank Moss (D-UT), cleverly proposed to the Senate Armed Services Committee that Utah and Nevada would deploy one hundred mobile MX missiles but required another state accept the other half of the force. As they anticipated, there were no takers. Thus, the nation never fielded a mobile MX missile.

In 1983, a combined mobile and fixed ICBM force that included the multi-warhead Peacekeeper and the single warhead Small ICBM, were both [recommended](#) by the congressionally mandated Scowcroft Commission. The dual system approach, noted Senator Malcolm Wallop (R-WY), was made because “[y]ou cannot make an elephant a rabbit and you can't make a rabbit an elephant!”

In 1986, the Air Force fielded 50 Peacekeeper missiles in silos, as part of President Ronald Reagan's nuclear modernization. However, with the end of the Cold War and a 50 percent cut to warheads under START I, plans for road-mobile Small ICBM and rail-mobile Peacekeeper missiles were both terminated.

Now, four decades later, with a nuclear arsenal 90 percent smaller than during the Cold War, the ACA rejects ICBMs altogether, whether fixed or mobile. In reality, their idea makes nuclear war more likely and does not address new strategic developments.

The most likely use of nuclear weapons is no longer a massive bolt-out-of-the blue strike, which arms control advocates cite as part of their rationale for eliminating the ICBM. The recent Strategic Posture Commission report unanimously concluded, as Mark Schneider explains, the [most likely use](#) of nuclear weapons against the United States is a coercive, but limited, nuclear strike as part of a regional conflict by Russia or China.

Within Russian strategy, limited strikes are part of an [escalate to win](#) approach that does not include strikes on American ICBMs. In fact, the very point of employing lower-yield tactical nuclear weapons is to keep strategic nuclear weapons out of the fight.

Most at risk are American military targets in Europe, the Western Pacific, and the Middle East. Here the US is already at risk with no theater nuclear forces in Asia and fewer than 200 fighter-delivered gravity bombs in Europe.

Unilaterally retiring American ICBMs from the nuclear triad would do nothing to prevent the use of nuclear weapons at either the strategic or theater level. In fact, a Russian or Chinese nuclear attack might prove more likely. For example, without ICBMs, American nuclear force structure would be reduced to five bomber and submarine bases and a handful of submarines at sea. More specifically, killing ICBMs reduces the number of targets an adversary must strike from over five hundred to about dozen—with none requiring a nuclear strike. The American deterrent is now survivable and allows for a robust second strike.

Eliminating the ICBM force invites a disarming attack by Russia or China. For example, although a majority of American ballistic missile submarines are at sea at any given time and are highly survivable, submarines are highly susceptible to conventional attack in port or when entering or leaving port. An underseas technology breakthrough would allow even our submarines at sea to be targeted.

Destroying the bomber force's two Weapons Storage Areas before weapons are unloaded could take the bomber force out of any fight. ICBMs alone force Russia and China to expend at least 1,000 warheads in hope of destroying the force, while also knowing hundreds of American ICBMs could retaliate even after a confirmed warhead strike on the US.

An American deterrent without ICBMs invites rather than prevents aggression because it reduces the uncertainty and risk of an attack. Reducing the US nuclear force to less than a dozen aim points invites cooperative nuclear-armed adversaries to hide their intentions, promise a "peaceful rise," and at a time of their choosing aim a possible surprise disarming strike at the United States. It also eliminates a significant hedge option for the United States.

Like the nuclear freeze, which Americans rejected half a century ago, once again the disarmament community proposes a dangerous unilateral measure that would make the very nuclear war they seek to avoid more likely. The American people must once again reject a bad idea.

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