

## Why America Needs ICBMs

By

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With the recent news that the Sentinel intercontinental ballistic missile (ICBM) program is expected to experience a [Nunn-McCurdy breach](#), which means program costs are expected to increase by [at least 15 percent](#), many in the arms control community are calling for termination of the program and the elimination of the ICBM leg of the nuclear triad. Such a decision would be a mistake. Let me explain.

With the Minuteman III ICBM fleet now [50 years old](#) and 35 years beyond its planned service life, there is [no option](#) but to build a new ICBM. Although Northrup Grumman, the prime contractor on the Sentinel program, made a good faith effort to estimate the cost of building a new missile and retrofitting Minuteman III launch control centers and launch facilities with the new hardware required for the new missile, no company has engaged in this kind of activity in [five decades](#).

Thus, in many respects, any estimate of costs can be no more than a ballpark estimate at best. Think about it. Have you ever tried to do a home improvement project for the very first time and it went exactly as you planned—without a hitch? Of course not. What about those HGTV shows where the contractor always finds something hidden behind the drywall that sends the remodel cost way up? Doing something once every 50 years with a workforce that has zero experience with such a project is a recipe for cost overruns.

This is the choice the nation made and must live with. It is hypocritical of arms control advocates to charge that Sentinel's cost overruns mean the program should be cancelled. If they applied that same logic to all government programs, we would also kill Social Security, Medicare, Medicaid, and student loans. In fact, we would kill just about every federal program ever funded. Almost all estimates of government programs are wrong—and wildly wrong.

Instead, we must deal with a reality that leaves the United States little choice but to move forward because the strategic environment is rapidly deteriorating, and no amount of optimism and idealism will change that fact. It is time reality overrides aspirations.

The facts are simple. Russia already has a [superior arsenal](#) to the United States and maintains a capacity to produce about 1,000 new nuclear weapons every year. And with Russia [no longer bound](#) by the New START treaty, Vladimir Putin can double or triple the size of his nuclear arsenal before the end of the decade. He already maintains at least a [10-to-1 advantage](#) in theater nuclear weapons.

China's [nuclear breakout](#) also caught the United States on its heels. The [DF-41](#) ICBM, for example, carries multiple reentry vehicles and is expected to fill the 300 [new ICBM silos](#) discovered in 2021. DF-41s filling those new silos could alone exceed the size of the entire American nuclear arsenal.

That says nothing of the new submarine-launched ballistic missiles, hypersonic weapons, and tactical nuclear weapons [China is deploying](#). To deter such capabilities America requires a secure and reliable nuclear deterrent, which must include the Sentinel.

## Why Does America Still Need ICBMs?

The fact that the basics of the ICBM mission have not changed much since they were first fielded may explain why some believe they are outdated. Before we commit to killing Sentinel and retiring the Minuteman, it is important to consider [some of their benefits](#).

First, ICBMs provide an excellent deterrent to nuclear attack on the homeland. The 400 Minuteman III silos spread across the American West are invulnerable to all but a massive nuclear missile attack. Thus, their existence sets a high threshold for attacking the United States, either conventionally or with nuclear weapons. Without ICBMs, our strategic nuclear targets shrink from over 500 to about a dozen, which could all be destroyed with conventional strikes. Only ICBM silos require a nuclear strike.

Second, ICBMs [cost less than the other two legs](#) of the nuclear triad—even with cost overruns. While Sentinel [will cost](#) an estimated \$130–150 billion over the next two to three decades, it is likely to prove operationally cost-effective over the long term. Remember, ICBMs are used every single day to deter the Russians and the Chinese. Our adversaries understand the power of an ICBM, which is why their nuclear forces are primarily composed of ICBMs.

Third, building a Sentinel provides the US an opportunity to consider deploying ICBMs in new and creative ways. With the United States government depending on the private sector for its space launch capability, the Sentinel also has some non-traditional missions that a common launch vehicle might provide. These include:

1. The ability to deploy time critical space assets like sensors, navigation, or communications satellites in response to a contingency; and
2. Closer to traditional missions are ballistic missile defense, anti-satellite kill vehicles, and conventional prompt global strike.

The benefit of such a system would be the ability to replace the top of a missile with a different payload to carry out a niche mission. At the same time, nuclear deterrence is preserved by those ICBMs still on alert.

Nuclear deterrence works by creating the fear of a massive retaliatory response. It achieves a psychological effect in the mind of an adversary. Non-traditional missions can support deterrence by taking away an adversary's belief in his potential success in achieving some advantage.

A [prompt global strike](#) capability, for example, would also fill a niche role, if needed, allowing the US to strike targets quickly without escalating to nuclear use. Sentinel makes that possible. Given its cost, only a small number of such weapons would be feasible, and all while complicating adversary strategy.

These are just some additional uses for Sentinel, but they do not change the fundamental reason for building a new ICBM—Minuteman III is 50 years old and well past its service life. Yes, there are cost overruns, but can we really expect any less when we build something once every half-century?

## Conclusion

In short, Vladimir Putin and Xi Jinping would love for the United States to cancel the Sentinel program. We should not give them what they want.