

# United States Senate

WASHINGTON, DC 20510

October 12, 2011

The Honorable Leon Panetta  
Secretary of Defense  
1000 Defense Pentagon  
Washington, DC 20301-1000

Dear Secretary Panetta:

We write today to ensure that you are fully aware of the many advantages our intercontinental ballistic missile fleet offers to our national defense, and urge you to maintain our cost-effective, land-based intercontinental ballistic missile (ICBM) force at the highest levels possible.

As the Administration seeks to implement the New START Treaty, it is distressing to hear some argue for a significant reduction, or even abandonment, of our ICBM force. We believe such an unprecedented reversal of our long-held and successful nuclear deterrent strategy is unwise and would create an unnecessary strategic danger. Accordingly, we continue to strongly support the deployment of 450 ICBMs. We do understand that the Administration and the Department of Defense (DoD) intend to reduce the number of deployed ICBMs as part of a wider New START Treaty compliance effort. If those plans proceed, we strongly urge DoD to maintain at least 420 ICBMs on alert, and preserve all 450 existing ICBM silos in warm status. We further urge that any reductions be spread equally between each of the three operational ICBM bases. Such a dispersal will not only provide the maximum effective deterrent, but if all 450 ICBM silos are maintained in a warm status this will further leverage the deterrence effect created by dispersal.

Each of the three components of our nuclear force has unique and complementary capabilities. We agree with the conclusions of the Strategic Posture Commission and the Nuclear Posture Review that reducing our force to a dyad or a monad structure could be destabilizing in unpredictable ways. The stabilizing, complementary nature of the triad becomes even more important as America's nuclear forces are reduced. Moreover, General Larry Welch and others argue persuasively that the ICBM is the most stabilizing and therefore the most valuable portion of our nuclear arsenal. This attribute will only increase as our number of warheads decreases. A sizable ICBM force will continue to deter near-peer competitors and dissuade others from developing a sizable nuclear force. Specifically, a dispersed, sovereign-based and single-warhead armed ICBM force makes a successful preemptive or attrition attack nearly impossible.

As the President and Congressional leaders take steps to address the debt crisis facing our nation, the Department of Defense has been asked to prudently reduce its budget without compromising our national security. We understand that difficult decisions will have to be made, but we would have serious objections to any proposals that would place our nation's most cost-effective strategic assets on the chopping block. ICBMs require just one-third to one-fifth the annual operating cost of the submarine-launched leg of the triad. And since the ICBM force is currently in the final stages of a more than decade-long effort to replace and modernize critical missile

components, it will be extremely cost-effective to maintain the Minuteman III fleet over the next two decades.

Of further concern, DoD has proposed terminating the production of ICBM solid rocket motors (SRMs). This is contrary to the DoD's recent statement that it is "reliant on large-SRMs to propel its strategic missile systems, making the SRM industrial base an essential industrial sector for the Department." The necessity of maintaining at least a minimum production capability is underscored since the recently modernized ICBM SRMs were only designed to last until 2020. Due to recent budget decisions, these SRMs will not be replaced until at least 2030. Therefore, in order to ensure our ICBM force is not placed in jeopardy due to an unexpected degradation of SRMs, we respectfully request the DoD include a long-term plan in its Fiscal Year 2013 Budget Request to maintain a minimal ICBM SRM production capability.

In conclusion, given the irreplaceable contributions to stability that the ICBM force provides, the strategic value of preserving the triad, and the relative cost advantages of the Minuteman, we continue to support the deployment of 450 ICBMs. If the Administration and the DoD proceed with plans to reduce the number of deployed ICBMs as part of a wider New START Treaty compliance effort, we feel very strongly that the Department of Defense should maximize the opportunities allowed by that treaty: maintain 420 ICBMs on alert, maintain all 450 silos in warm status, and ensure that reductions are evenly distributed across the ICBM force.

We appreciate you taking these issues under careful consideration and would be grateful if you could keep us informed of the Department and the Administration's continued deliberations on these matters.

Sincerely,

Kent Conrad

Mike Enzi

John Hoenes

Mike Lee

Robin L. Hatch

Max Baucus

John Barrasso

Jim Tester