

United States Senate

WASHINGTON, DC 20510

December 7, 2011

The Honorable Leon Panetta
Secretary of Defense
1000 Defense Pentagon, Room 3E880
Washington, DC 20301-1000

Dear Secretary Panetta:

We write to express concern about the letter you sent to Senators McCain and Graham on November 14th stating that the Department of Defense would consider eliminating America's intercontinental ballistic missile (ICBM) fleet if defense spending is cut to levels required under the Budget Control Act's sequester mechanism. We believe eliminating the ICBM wing would be disastrous for national security and fail to deliver significant budget savings over the next ten years. We hope to work with you to make the cuts required by our nation's financial constraints without jeopardizing national security or gutting critical national assets such as the ICBM force and we urge you to include robust funding for the ICBM wing in the Fiscal Year 2013 budget.

We appreciate the fiscal challenges facing the Department of Defense in the coming years, but ICBM reductions are not a smart way to achieve budget savings. ICBMs are by far the most cost-efficient leg of the nuclear triad. The ICBM fleet provides a critical deterrent because of its considerable survivability. Unlike an attack on the submarine or bomber leg of the triad, an enemy would be required to strike deep within the continental United States in order effectively eliminate ICBM strike capability. Such a visible, highly dispersed force creates a powerful disincentive for any adversary while also providing clear reassurance to our allies, many of whom have chosen not to pursue their own nuclear arsenal because of the security provided by America's nuclear umbrella.

Also, the ICBM force is in the final stages of a decade-long modernization effort. It will be extremely cost effective to maintain the Minuteman III fleet through 2030 as is now planned. It is doubtful that the Department could achieve \$8 billion in savings – as estimated in your November 14th letter – by eliminating the ICBM force. The large costs associated with closing down large installations, such as environmental remediation and other costs associated with dismantling nuclear infrastructure, would likely offset most potential savings.

We have long held that a deep reduction or abandonment of our ICBM force would create unacceptable strategic risks for the United States. We have urged the Department of Defense to maintain at least 420 ICBMs on alert and preserve all 450 existing ICBM silos in warm status. The 1251 report submitted to Congress in May of 2010 along with the New START treaty confirmed that retaining this force structure is allowable under the treaty.

Deficit reduction is a high priority of ours. Former Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff Admiral Mike Mullen cited debt as America's the top national security threat. As Congress works to balance our nation's books, we want to work with you to make sure the Defense cuts are smart and that we continue to make the investments needed to strengthen the best military in the world. We appreciate you taking these issues under careful consideration and thank you for your service to our country.

Sincerely,



Max Baucus
U.S. Senator



Jon Tester
U.S. Senator