United States Senate

WASHINGTON, DC 20510

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Chairman Ben Nelson
Senate Armed Services Committee
Subcommittee on Strategic Forces
228 Russell Senate Office Building
Washington, DC 20510-6050

Ranking Member Jeff Sessions
Senate Armed Services Committee
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228 Russell Senate Office Building
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Dear Chairman Nelson and Senator Sessions:

As members of the Senate ICBM Coalition, we write today to submit for the record our views on the United States nuclear deterrent as part of the nuclear posture hearings of the Senate Armed Services Committee and its Strategic Forces Subcommittee. This testimony comes at a critical juncture. As the Administration plans to implement the reductions required by New START, we want to highlight the importance of maintaining a robust fleet of stabilizing, deterring, and affordable Intercontinental Ballistic Missiles (ICBMs).

For decades, America's nuclear triad of heavy bombers, ballistic missile submarines, and land-based missiles has protected the United States from harm by deterring the threat of nuclear war. From a Cold War peak of 13,600 deployed nuclear weapons, the United States and Russia have worked on a bilateral basis to first limit the growth of nuclear forces, and then to reduce them. Today, as a result of this work, we have eliminated nearly nine-tenths of these weapons while maintaining the construct of strategic deterrence.

Even as these efforts and the end of the Cold War have made our relationship with Russia more stable and transparent, we still face significant strategic threats that must be confronted and deterred. Around the world, adversaries and near-peer competitors alike are developing and refining nuclear and ballistic missile capabilities. North Korea has conducted two nuclear tests and continues work to extend the range of its ballistic missiles. Iran is widely suspected to be pursuing a nuclear weapons program, and publicly acknowledges its ballistic missile program. China is expanding its nuclear forces, and Russia is developing next-generation weapons. As a result, instead of deterring one nuclear power, we and the allies under our nuclear umbrella are now challenged with deterring the volatile threats of nuclear-armed rogue states, proliferation, and nuclear terrorism – sometimes all at once. Therefore, in order to have a truly effective deterrent, we must maintain sufficient strategic forces to deter these threats simultaneously.

In the face of these threats, the mutually supporting characteristics of the current nuclear triad create a powerful and unbreakable deterrent that ensures we retain the capability to hold the widest array of military targets at risk. Hedging against technological failure or targeted attrition over time, they ensure our policymakers have options in times of crisis. That is why the U.S. Strategic Command, the Strategic Posture Commission, and the Nuclear Posture Review all agree that a dyad or a monad structure could be destabilizing in unpredictable ways.

Despite the proven success of our nuclear force structure and the threat of finding ourselves embroiled in conflict with a nuclear-armed adversary, advocates for arms control are calling for additional unilateral reductions. It is deeply ironic that some of the steps suggested by these advocates would have the unintended consequence of eliminating the stabilizing features that make our force structure so effective.

The most stabilizing part of this structure is the ICBM force. As Lieutenant General Frank Klotz, the former commander of the Air Force's Global Strike Command put it in 2009, the "Minuteman III force presents any potential adversary with an almost insurmountable challenge should he contemplate attacking the United States. In this case, numbers do matter...and the ICBM thus contributes immeasurably to both deterrence and stability in a crisis."

The United States today has 450 land-based missiles deployed across five states and 34,600 square miles, with 150 missiles each at Malmstrom Air Force Base, Montana; Minot Air Force Base, North Dakota; and F.E. Warren Air Force Base, Wyoming. Some have argued that the static positioning of the ICBM fleet makes it more vulnerable to attack. In fact the broad dispersion across sovereign U.S. territory, the spacing of silos within each missile wing, and sheer numbers of the ICBM force make a preemptive or disarming attack realistically impossible. An adversary would need complete confidence that it could destroy 450 separate targets to risk a disarming first strike. Without a 100 percent success rate, the surviving force would pose an assured response because of the inherent robust and redundant capabilities of the ICBM.

Historically, arms control supporters have argued against the ICBM force on the grounds that missiles loaded with multiple warheads posed attractive targets for an enemy first strike. However, the newest Nuclear Posture Review publicly announced that the United States would begin to download the ICBM force to one warhead per missile, a wise step recommended by the ICBM Coalition. Additional reductions to delivery vehicles in general and to the ICBM force in particular would require greater warhead loading of the remaining missiles, perversely reversing this stabilizing trend.

Another perverse incentive that might be created by efforts to decrease the size of our nuclear forces too quickly is that of targeting civilian populations. The size and composition of our strategic force is and always must be based on careful military analysis of what is required to hold at risk a sufficient number of our potential adversaries' strategic military targets to accomplish deterrence. Those who call for arbitrary lower numbers sometimes fail to realize that, as a matter of policy and law, the United States does not target population centers for their own sake. We only hold at risk legitimate military targets, which require more delivery vehicles and warheads to destroy than unhardened civilian population centers.

In addition to the flawed strategic logic of arms control advocates calling for unilateral nuclear disarmament, the other primary driver of calls for further reductions to the nuclear triad is the long-term cost of modernizing and recapitalizing the force. But the Minuteman III force is modernized through 2030 and represents the most cost-effective deterrence system the United States possesses. The Congressional Research Service (CRS) determined that the sea-based leg

of the triad, which relies heavily on expensive technology demanded by a difficult operating environment, accounts for 61 percent of the cost of our strategic forces. Bombers offer dual capability but require heavy operational costs to maintain crew skills. In contrast, ICBMs are the most cost-effective leg of our triad, costing less than one-third as much per delivery vehicle than the other two legs.

In short, the ICBM force is the least expensive leg of the triad, even as it provides the preponderance of our nation's alert force – around 90 percent, according to U.S. Strategic Command. A robust, dispersed, sovereign-based, and single-warhead loaded ICBM force dramatically decreases the risk of nuclear war by providing a stabilizing and visible constant in our nuclear posture. This is why we support the continued deployment of 450 ICBMs.

We recognize that the Administration has stated an intention to reduce the number of deployed ICBMs to a range of 400 to 420 missiles as part of a wider New START Treaty compliance effort. If those plans proceed, we respectfully ask that you urge the Administration to maintain at least 420 deployed ICBMs and preserve all 450 ICBM silos in warm status. Any reductions must be made in a careful, incremental way to avoid the threat of introducing instability. We further urge that any reductions be spread equally between each of the three operational ICBM bases. This dispersion will maximize the stabilizing nature of the ICBM force and provide the maximum effective deterrent. Meanwhile, maintaining all 450 silos ensures reversibility and flexibility, key watchwords of the Department's new strategic guidance.

As the Senate Armed Services Committee hears from General Kehler and the Strategic Forces Subcommittee hears from Generals Kowalski and Chambers, Admiral Benedict, and Assistant Secretaries Madelyn Creedon and Andrew Weber, we thank you for taking into consideration our perspective on the important contributions the land-based deterrent makes to our national security. We look forward to continuing to engage this committee and all of our colleagues on these issues as the Senate considers proposals for implementing the New START Treaty, maintaining the nuclear triad, and ensuring the continued success of strategic deterrence in the future.

Sincerely,

Kent Conrad

Michael B. Enzi

Orrin G. Hatch

Max Baucus

John Barrasso

John Thune

John Hoeven