



Center for Strategic and Budgetary Assessments

**ANALYSIS**

## **America's Nuclear Missiles Need Major Modernization**

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By: Eric Edelman and Franklin C. Miller

Related Expert: Eric Edelman

It has been decades since most Americans gave much thought to the nuclear balance of power. While nuclear issues since 1991 have been dominated by proliferation to rogue states—Iraq, Libya, Syria, Iran, North Korea—America's nuclear forces have not kept pace with developments in Russian and China, respectively the world's largest and third-largest nuclear powers.

For seventy years, the United States' nuclear deterrent has depended on the "nuclear triad"—the combination of land-based intercontinental ballistic missiles (ICBMs), submarine-launched ballistic missiles, and nuclear-capable bombers. The theory behind the redundancy is that it is practically impossible to destroy America's nuclear capabilities at one time, so a retaliatory strike is guaranteed. The credibility of that retaliation deters another power from committing a first strike, preventing nuclear war.

To maintain that deterrence, the U.S. spends significant resources ensuring its nuclear forces are capable, survivable, and up-to date. But the current fleet of ICBMs, Minuteman IIIs dating from the 1970s, are becoming more difficult and expensive to modernize.

The proposed replacement missile, the Ground Based Strategic Deterrent (GBSD), has come under criticism from two camps. The more disingenuous group favors extending the life of the ageing Minuteman over procuring the GBSD, which would make a viable strategic triad beyond the 2030s virtually impossible. The more honest—but wrongheaded—group calls for the complete elimination of the United States' ICBMs. Both groups cling to—and propagate—a series of myths about U.S. ICBMs: that they are destabilizing, on a hair trigger, and subject to being launched on false warnings; that they force the hand of a president to launch them in case of attack; and that they do not really require replacement with the GBSD which, at any rate, would be too expensive. Underlying these myths is a belief that the nuclear triad is no longer necessary.

Each of these assertions is wrong.