

# ICBMs Are Not Needed to Hedge Against Submarine Vulnerability

## FACT SHEET

The Pentagon is currently planning to replace its current arsenal of intercontinental ballistic missiles (ICBMs) with a **brand-new missile force**, known as the Ground Based Strategic Deterrent (GBSD); it is estimated to cost approximately **\$100 billion in acquisition fees** and \$264 billion throughout its life-cycle until 2075.

However, critics of the GBSD program are noting a growing number of concerns over the program's increasing costs, tight schedule, and lack of 21st century national security relevance. Many argue that **the GBSD's price tag is too high amid a plethora of other budgetary pressures**. Many also say that alternative deterrence options are available at a much lower cost, such as **life-extending the current Minuteman III ICBM force**.

ICBM advocates suggest that brand-new ICBMs are needed as a "hedge" against the prospect of future vulnerabilities to the submarine force.

However, these fears of a suddenly "transparent ocean" are exaggerated, in several key respects:

- **US ballistic missile submarines are among the quietest on the planet.** As the 2018 Nuclear Posture Review states, "When on patrol, SSBNs are, at present, virtually undetectable, and there are no known, near-term credible threats to the survivability of the SSBN force."
- **The next-generation of US ballistic missile submarines will be even quieter** due to the introduction of electric-drive propulsion trains; meanwhile, Russian and Chinese ballistic missile submarines remain relatively noisy.

- **The US is actually more likely to develop new anti-submarine warfare tools than its strategic competitors.** Given American superiority in anti-submarine warfare capabilities, "it is not the United States that should be cautious about the viability of a new generation of SSBNs," writes one analyst, "but China."
- **Even if an adversary were able to detect, track, and target a US ballistic missile submarine, the survivability of the fleet would not be in question.** Given the logistical and technological hurdles, it is improbable that every US submarine could be destroyed before they fire their own nuclear missiles in retaliation.

The US ballistic missile submarine force carries approximately 70% of the United States' deployed nuclear warheads, and **can launch nuclear weapons just as quickly as ICBMs**.

Even without the ICBMs, an adversary could never hope to destroy every US bomber and nuclear-armed submarine in an attempted first strike—which is why such a strike remains incredibly unlikely today. **Therefore, a reduced number of ICBMs—or even their complete elimination—would not meaningfully affect an adversary's deterrence calculations.**

"During the Cold War, the United States relied on ICBMs because they provided accuracy that was not then achievable by submarine-launched missiles or bombers. They also provided an insurance policy in case America's nuclear submarine force was disabled. That's not necessary anymore. **Today, the United States' submarine and bomber forces are highly accurate, and we have enough confidence in their security that we do not need an additional insurance policy — especially one that is so expensive and open to error.**"

— Former Secretary of Defense William J. Perry