

# Life-Extending Minuteman III is a Feasible Alternative to Building a New ICBM

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**.

It is **technologically feasible** to continue extending the life of the Minuteman III ICBM at current force levels until approximately 2050. In order to do this, the Air Force would need to replace the Minuteman III's solid rocket motors and guidance systems, and potentially reduce its annual testing rate in order to maintain a sufficient inventory of test assets.

Similar ICBM sub-system replacement programs took place approximately two decades ago, and cost only \$7 billion, compared to the GBSD's \$100 billion acquisition price. Upon completion of these programs, Air Force analysts declared that the refurbished Minuteman IIIs were **"basically new missiles except for the shell."**

Clearly, life-extension operations are possible—not to mention significantly cheaper than building a new ICBM force from scratch—and the Air Force has a good track record of completing them.

Not only have external analysts suggested life-extension as a viable option, but in March 2019, Lt. Gen. Richard Clark—the Air Force's deputy chief of staff for strategic deterrence and nuclear integration—testified to the House Armed Services Committee that it would be **technologically feasible to extend the lives of the propulsion and guidance systems** one more time, despite his stated preference for proceeding with GBSD.

Furthermore, a 2014 RAND report commissioned by Air Force Global Strike Command found **"no evidence that would necessarily preclude the possibility of long-term sustainment."** In fact, the report noted, **"we found many who believed the default approach for the future is incremental modernization**, that is, updating the sustainability and capability of the Minuteman III system as needed and in perpetuity."

New polling conducted by FAS and ReThink Media suggests that **64% of respondents approve of delaying the GBSD and continuing to life-extend the Minuteman III ICBM while the GBSD program undergoes a comprehensive review**. In fact, this course of action would be supported on a bipartisan basis.

