

Ground Based Strategic Deterrent: High Risk, No Reward

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**.

The primary concerns with GBSD are as follows:

- **The price tag keeps rising.** The Pentagon estimated in August 2020 that the GBSD program's acquisition costs would total \$95.8 billion. This is approximately \$10 billion more than the \$85 billion acquisition estimate set by the Pentagon in August 2016, and over \$30 billion more than the Air Force's \$62.3 billion estimate in 2015. **The GBSD's ever-increasing price tag indicates that the program is not nearly as cost-effective as initially projected.**
- **The Pentagon surprisingly sole-sourced the contract to Northrop Grumman.** There is no precedent for sole-sourcing a contract of this size—one of the largest Pentagon contracts in a generation—as doing so generally results in increased costs and lasting harm to the country's underlying industrial base. By the Air Force's own admission, the GBSD's price tag will likely go up as a result.

- By its own admission, **the Pentagon cannot afford all of the weapons it wants to buy.** Meanwhile, the bills for several big-ticket procurement projects—including the GBSD—are all coming due at roughly the same time. With growing recognition that the Pentagon simply cannot afford all of these programs simultaneously, these acquisition programs have been characterized as "fiscal time bombs."

The United States' ICBM force does not address key 21st century deterrence requirements. The missiles' flight paths render them unusable against Chinese or North Korean military targets because they would be forced to fly over Russian territory. Consequently, US submarines and bombers are assigned the nuclear mission against China and North Korea—not ICBMs.



Image Courtesy of Global Zero (2012)

Their fixed, known positions also creates a destabilizing psychological pressure to launch nuclear weapons quickly in a crisis—even in the midst of a false alarm. Other weapons in the US nuclear arsenal—such as ballistic missile submarines—can respond to a nuclear attack just as quickly as ICBMs, yet their survivability means that they do not come with the same kinds of pressures. As a result, **ICBMs can be considered to be a uniquely destabilizing weapon system.**