

Intercontinental Ballistic Missiles (ICBMs) Increase the Risk of Nuclear War

“A nuclear war cannot be won and must never be fought.”
— President Ronald Reagan¹

President Ronald Reagan’s point, made in 1982, is easy to understand and is still valid today. All nuclear weapons kill indiscriminately; each one can be expected to kill tens or hundreds of thousands of people. A nuclear war would devastate human civilization and could ultimately end life on earth. If the point of having nuclear weapons is to prevent them from ever being used, then we have a national security requirement—as well as a moral obligation—to ensure that they reduce the likelihood of nuclear war.

But the U.S. ICBM force does the opposite.

1. Built for All or Nothing

U.S. ICBMs, deployed in silos located in Wyoming, Montana, and North Dakota, are not built to survive a Russian nuclear attack. If they are not used upon warning of incoming missiles, they risk being destroyed. The only way to protect U.S. ICBMs is to launch them before they are hit. Once the ICBMs are launched, they cannot be recalled.

The U.S. ICBM force is comprised of more than 400 nuclear weapons, each many times more powerful than the bombs that destroyed Hiroshima and Nagasaki combined.² They are not designed to be used one at a time. In response to a single order, hundreds of nuclear strikes would be delivered.

2. High Risk of Accident or Miscalculation

ICBMs are always kept on high alert and ready to launch within minutes. This system leaves little room for error. Yet errors inevitably occur:

- In 2018, a miscommunication during a drill at the Hawaii Emergency Management Agency led to this message being broadcast to smart phones across the state: “BALLISTIC MISSILE THREAT INBOUND TO HAWAII. SEEK IMMEDIATE SHELTER. THIS IS NOT A DRILL.” The employees who made the mistake knew immediately they had issued a false alarm, but procedural confusion delayed a correction alert for 38 minutes.³
- In 1983, Soviet early warning computers indicated a U.S. ICBM attack, and the decision to assume it was a malfunction was left to a lone watch officer, Stanislav Petrov. He is now credited with saving the world from an all-out nuclear war.

- In 1979, a training tape was accidentally loaded into a computer at the North American Aerospace Defense Command (NORAD), which “spuriously indicated an attack by 1,400 Soviet ICBMs, information that simultaneously appeared on warning consoles at the Pentagon, Strategic Air Command, and elsewhere.”⁴ The mistake was identified in a few minutes, but miscommunication led interceptor aircraft to take off in response to the false alarm.

Unlike other nuclear weapons systems, ICBMs demand a decision within minutes. Submarines patrolling the world’s oceans are designed to survive a nuclear attack and still deliver a devastating nuclear response anywhere on earth. Bombers can be dispersed in a crisis, take hours to fly to their targets, and can be recalled if the alert proves to be a false alarm.

Any redundancy provided by ICBMs is outweighed by the increased risk they pose that nuclear strikes would be launched by accident or as a result of miscalculation.

3. Provocative and Dangerous

The United States maintains three types of nuclear weapons platforms—bomber aircraft, submarine-launched ballistic missiles at sea, and ICBMs on land—forming what the Pentagon refers to as the nuclear triad. The president can disperse bomber aircraft in a crisis, and if bomber aircraft are ordered on strike missions the President would have several hours to recall them before they reach their targets. With ballistic missile submarines, the president can wait to verify an attack and assess the damage before ordering a strike. ICBMs are the most vulnerable leg of the triad because their locations are fixed and known; they would not survive a large Russian surprise attack.

ICBMs are both a tempting target and a tangible threat. What the Russians see are hundreds of nuclear missiles aimed at them and on 24-hour alert, continuously for half a century. Russia knows these ICBMs can be launched in just a few minutes, so defending against them requires a plan to strike them all quickly. The fact that the Russians could attack all of our ICBMs quickly is why plans are in place for the president to decide within three minutes to launch all of our ICBMs so they are not destroyed on the ground.⁵ This timeline presses both sides to develop ever more dangerous practices for instant escalation to all-out nuclear war.

ICBMs add nothing to the deterrent capability provided by U.S. nuclear submarines. Because they are kept on hair-trigger alert and perceived as threatening, they increase the risk of unintentional nuclear war.

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¹ Ronald Reagan, *“Radio Address to the Nation on Nuclear Weapons,”* April 17, 1982.

² Hans Kristensen and Matt Korda, *“Nuclear Notebook: United States nuclear forces, 2020,”* Bulletin of the Atomic Scientists, January 1, 2020.

³ *“Timeline of the Hawaii false missile alert shows how drill went wrong,”* CNN, January 30, 2018.

⁴ Willam Burr, *“False Warnings of Soviet Missile Attacks Put U.S. Forces on Alert in 1979-1980,”* National Security Archive Briefing Book #699, March 16, 2020.

⁵ Jeffrey Lewis quoted in Matt Korda, *Alternatives to the Ground-Based Strategic Deterrent*, Federation of American Scientists, February 5, 2021, p. 8.