

Why It's Safe to Scrap Bill Perry's Advice

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Former Secretary of Defense William Perry recently took to the pages of the New York Times to argue against President Obama's plan to develop and field the ground-based strategic deterrent (GBSD)—a replacement for the Minuteman III intercontinental ballistic missile (ICBM). The problem with his arguments is that they are dead wrong. Let us explain.

Dr. Perry opens by arguing that ICBMs are Cold War relics that are some of the “most dangerous weapons in the world.” He goes on to argue that “They could even trigger an accidental nuclear war.” Dr. Perry then recounts an experience in which—nearly 40 years ago—the North American Aerospace Defense Command (NORAD) received a false alert of incoming Soviet ICBMs and correctly verified that there was no Soviet launch.

By suggesting that this false alert could very well have been misinterpreted as an actual attack and led to an accidental nuclear war, Dr. Perry dismisses the perfect track record of nation's space and land-based early warning systems. The reality of the nation's nuclear command and control system is such that there are multiple and redundant space-based systems that exist to detect launches of ballistic missiles with much greater accuracy and speed than four decades ago. Not only are today's detection systems far better than those of the Carter administration, but any potential launch must be detected and verified by both a space-based detection system and a ground-based radar—specifically to prevent false returns and a subsequent accidental nuclear conflict.

Surprisingly, Dr. Perry blames the ICBMs themselves, rather than the true culprits of human and computer error, for the false alarm. Thus, his solution of scrapping U.S. ICBMs is an ineffective solution to a problem which was corrected long ago.

Thus, when critics of ICBMs suggest that the threat of accidental nuclear conflict is such that the nation cannot afford to have such weapons, they are completely ignoring a complex and redundant detection system that is designed specifically to prevent an accidental launch—which it has never failed to prevent. The United States' detection systems, in particular, are better today than they have ever been, further reducing the probability of accidental nuclear war.

It is also common for critics of ICBMs to argue that modernizing the nation's 1970s era ICBMs risks starting an arms race with Russia and China. However, if this is an arms race, then Russia and China have been running for 10 years with their extensive modernization programs while the

United States is still tying its shoes at the starting block. Russia and China are both reportedly developing road and rail-mobile ICBMs that are more accurate and have greater ability to penetrate ballistic missile defenses. For the first time in its nuclear history China is in the process of fielding an ICBM that will carry multiple nuclear warheads. The reality of the situation is that Russia and China set out on these modernization programs while the United States maintained its one ICBM system for decades beyond its planned life. Some race.

As one of the cheapest legs of the U.S. nuclear triad, ICBMs are a bargain for their deterrent effect. The U.S. will spend less than one percent of its defense budget each year on ICBMs for the foreseeable future while realizing cost savings because the new ICBMs will be cheaper to maintain than the old.

Dr. Perry and other critics also suggest that ICBMs, nuclear-capable bombers, and nuclear ballistic missile submarines are little more than redundant systems. This is like saying that a corvette, pick-up truck, and station wagon are all just cars. In reality, each has a very different and distinct purpose that is not equally performed by the others. The same is true of each leg of the nuclear triad.

ICBMs, for example, are the only leg of the triad that requires that an adversary launches a large-scale nuclear attack on the United States to destroy them. The submarine and bomber legs of the triad can be destroyed by conventional attack—lowering the stakes for attacking them. The strategic effect of requiring a massive attack on the American homeland is that it dramatically raises the bar for any adversary to contemplate such an attack. This is a good thing.

We want a nuclear war to remain unthinkable. Unilateral nuclear cuts do nothing to advance that cause and may, in fact, plant a dark seed of hope in an adversary's mind.

In the final analysis, Dr. Perry and other critics of ICBMs make assertions that are simply inaccurate. We no longer live in the Cold War, but a much more complex and dangerous world and it is time critics of the ICBM join the rest of us in the present.

Adam Lowther is Director of the School for Advanced Nuclear Deterrence Studies. Matthew Costlow is a Policy Analyst at the National Institute for Public Policy. The views expressed in this article are their own and do not represent the opinions of the U.S. government or any organization with which they are affiliated.