

United States Senate

WASHINGTON, DC 20510

September 21, 2005

The Honorable Donald Rumsfeld
Secretary of Defense
The Pentagon, 3E-880
Washington, D.C. 20301

Dear Mr. Secretary:

America's dispersed, alert Minuteman III Intercontinental Ballistic Missile (ICBM) force is a critical element of the nuclear triad and represents our most responsive, stabilizing, and cost-effective strategic force. We, the members of the Senate ICBM Coalition, have gathered together today to discuss these issues and urge you to continue to support the Nuclear Posture Review's conclusion that 500 nuclear-armed Minuteman III missiles will be necessary through at least 2020.

In the next several weeks, the Department of Defense will finalize the Quadrennial Defense Review (QDR), which is considering possible changes to our nation's ICBM force under the rubric of "tailorable deterrence." According to press reports, these include re-MIRVing the Minuteman force, reducing the number of nuclear-armed missiles, and shifting some ICBMs from nuclear to conventional warheads. Some of these developments raise troubling issues for the nation and may set us on a dangerous road to dismantling the nuclear triad.

We believe that the current plans for the U.S. ICBM force are prudent. The Department's current activities will lead toward a force of 500 missiles, each with a single nuclear warhead. A long series of Air Force and Department of Defense studies over the last decade have endorsed this approach to nuclear deterrence, which is consistent with the Moscow Treaty. Consistent with the treaty, the Air Force has completed the deactivation of the Peacekeeper (MX) missile force, bringing the total number of ICBMs down to 500. The Air Force is also currently "downloading" the Minuteman III ICBM force from three warheads apiece to single nuclear warheads.

It is critical to U.S. national security that we maintain the balanced nuclear force structure envisioned by the 2002 Nuclear Posture Review and codified in the Moscow Treaty. A gradual reduction to a total of 1,700-2,200 warheads by 2012 is the appropriate policy, both cost-effective and stabilizing. We believe that the QDR should affirm this force structure and ask you and Deputy Secretary England to ensure that it does so.

The strategic nuclear forces that deterred Soviet aggression and kept the limited conflicts of the Cold War era from escalating to global annihilation continue to play a critical role in deterring aggression and dissuading new near-peer competitors. Through decades of continuous evolution and improvement, U.S. nuclear forces have proven their value as "top cover" for the rest of our military. We believe that the key principle governing strategic nuclear force planning is that the numbers of our forces and the diversity of their basing modes and delivery capabilities must remain more than sufficient to deter any nuclear threat or blackmail. At its present size, our ICBM force

represents a nearly insurmountable hedge against strategic surprise. That force, because of its broad dispersion and high survivability, is nearly impossible to preempt or disarm.

In combination with the other legs of the traditional triad, a 500 missile force of nuclear ICBMs has a powerful dissuasive effect on potential adversaries. The continuing value of these forces has been affirmed by Nuclear Posture Reviews and other studies, including the 2002 NPR's embedding of these forces in the "New Triad." We must maintain force levels more than sufficient to dissuade any potential adversary from pursuing parity with our forces. This dissuasive capability also helps to reduce the risk of regional arms races that could force our non-nuclear friends and allies to develop nuclear capabilities of their own.

Finally, we do not believe that it would be prudent policy for the Pentagon to field a conventional ICBM capability using Minuteman III ICBMs. Basing conventional ICBMs within the current nuclear missile fields raises extremely troubling issues for strategic stability, while transferring missiles from those fields to support the conventional mission would unduly weaken nuclear deterrence.

According to press reports, it is your intention to "pare back investments in equipment and organizations where U.S. forces enjoy significant advantage over potential enemies." The bilateral framework of the Moscow Treaty leaves us in a position of parity with Russia in strategic nuclear weapons, rather than significant advantage. In land-based ICBMs, the Russians currently enjoy their own significant advantage. For this reason, we do not believe our ICBM force should be a strong candidate for paring back.

Thank you for your consideration. We look forward to working with you to maintain a force of 500 nuclear-armed Minuteman III missiles.

Sincerely,



KENT CONRAD



BYRON L. DORGAN



MIKE ENZI



CRAIG THOMAS



MAX BAUCUS



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