

INSIDE THE ICBM LOBBY: Special Interests or The National Interest?

William D. Hartung | Arms & Security Program

Intercontinental Ballistic Missiles (ICBMs) have been called “some of the most dangerous weapons in the world” by former Defense Secretary William Perry, because under current policies the president would have only a matter of minutes to decide whether to launch them in a crisis, increasing the risks of an accidental nuclear war.¹ Despite this reality, proposals for reducing this risk have routinely been blocked, in significant part due to a group of Senators from states that host ICBM bases or ICBM maintenance and development activities, often referred to as the ICBM Coalition. The Coalition includes Senators from Montana, North Dakota, Utah, and Wyoming.²

The policies promoted by the ICBM Coalition and its allies do not have wide public support. A recent poll conducted by ReThink Media and the Federation of American Scientists found that 60% of Americans supported either forgoing the development of a new ICBM, eliminating ICBMs altogether, or eliminating all nuclear weapons, an indication that a change in current ICBM policies would have significant public support.³ In addition, nearly two-thirds of respondents (64%) expressed a preference for delaying the new ICBM – known formally as the Ground-Based Strategic Deterrent (GBSD) -- while continuing to extend the life of existing land-based missiles while the GBSD program undergoes a comprehensive review.⁴



“Unarmed U.S. Air Force Minuteman III ICBM Test Launch,” May 3, 2017, Source: U.S. Department of Defense on flickr

The efforts of the ICBM Coalition have been supplemented by lobbying and campaign contributions from ICBM contractors, led by Northrop Grumman, which has received a sole source, \$13.3 billion contract to build a new ICBM, known formally as the Ground-Based Strategic Deterrent, or GBSD.⁵ Current estimates indicate that building and operating the GBSD and related warheads will cost \$264 billion over the life of the program, which would

1. William J. Perry, “Why It’s Safe to Scrap America’s ICBMs,” *New York Times*, September 30, 2016, <https://www.nytimes.com/2016/09/30/opinion/why-its-safe-to-scrap-americas-icbms.html>

2. Much of the material in this issue brief is based on William D. Hartung, “Inside the ICBM Lobby: Special Interests or the National Interest,” Center for International Policy report, February 2021 [link]

3. Aaron Mehta, “Majority of Voters Support ICBM Replacement Alternatives, New Poll Finds,” *Defense News*, February 5, 2021, <https://www.defensenews.com/smr/nuclear-arsenal/2021/02/05/majority-of-voters-support-icbm-replacement-alternatives-new-poll-finds/>

4. Ibid.

5. William Hartung, “Corrupt Bargain: One Company’s Monopoly Over Land-Based Nuclear Missiles,” Center for International Policy, September 2020, https://3ba8a190-62da-4c98-86d2-893079d87083.usrfiles.com/ugd/3ba8a1_71f1d54835f7421b8cc0e0435adfa7a6.pdf



ICBMs displayed at the National Museum of the United States Air Force in Dayton, OH, Aug. 1, 2013, Source: Sascha Pohflepp on flickr

provide a steady flow of revenue to Northrop Grumman and associated companies for years to come.⁶ Northrop Grumman's lobbying efforts have been supplemented by a dozen major GBSB subcontractors, including heavy hitters like Lockheed Martin and General Dynamics.

Over the past decade, major ICBM contractors have made roughly \$1.2 million in campaign contributions to members of the ICBM Coalition, and over \$15 million more to members of key committees that play a central role in determining how much is spent on ICBMs: the Senate and House Armed Services Strategic Forces Subcommittees and the Senate and House Defense Appropriations Subcommittees.

ICBM contractors also have powerful lobbying machines that can be brought to bear on behalf of major weapons projects. Northrop Grumman and its top subcontractors spent over \$119 million on lobbying in 2019 and 2020 alone and employed 410 lobbyists among them. While not all of these lobbyists were employed to work on the ICBM issue, the substantial lobbying resources of the ICBM contractors give them preferred access to key members of Congress and help build relationships that can be leveraged for a variety of purposes.

6. Anthony Capaccio, "New U.S. ICBMs Could Cost Up to \$264 Billion Over Decades," Bloomberg News, October 3, 2020, <https://www.bloomberg.com/news/articles/2020-10-03/new-u-s-icbms-could-cost-up-to-264-billion-over-decades>

Table 1: Lobbying Expenditures and Number of Lobbyists, ICBM Contractors, 2019/2020⁷

Company	Lobbying Expenditures (2019-2020)	# of Lobbyists (2020)
Northrop Grumman	\$25.6 million	57
Lockheed Martin	\$25.9 million	69
General Dynamics	\$21.3 million	80
United Technologies	\$12.8 million	53
Honeywell	\$10.6 million	50
L3/Harris	\$9.1 million	40
Textron	\$7.2 million	19
Aerojet Rocketdyne	\$3.2 million	16
Bechtel	\$1.9 million	13
Parsons	\$1.3 million	3
Kratos	\$0.8 million	7
Total	\$119.7 million	410

The jobs and revenues tied to a new ICBM should not be allowed to override the security benefits of forgoing it. At this early stage of the program, the number of jobs involved in developing the GBSD is minimal and dropping the program would not impact jobs at the ICBM bases.

For its part, Northrop Grumman claims that the early stages of the new ICBM project will create 10,000 jobs at 125 facilities in 32 states.⁸ The company has not provided documentation of these estimates.

If true, the company's estimate of ICBM related jobs would be well under one hundredth of a per cent of a national labor force of 160 million people, and the jobs are likely to be

7. Source: Center for Responsive Politics "Open Secrets" data base. *Figures for 2019 only.

8. The map of ICBM production sites is on the Northrop Grumman web site at <https://www.northropgrumman.com/wp-content/uploads/Approved-NG20-1485-200812-GBSD-Nationwide-Team-Map.pdf>

concentrated in a small number of facilities, with other locations receiving a handful of jobs at most.

For those sites that do have significant ICBM development related employment, alternative expenditures on infrastructure or green manufacturing would create one and one-half times as many jobs per amount spent on ICBMs, as noted in an analysis conducted for Brown University's Costs of War Project.⁹ In fact, if invested in green manufacturing, a significant reduction in Pentagon spending could create a net increase of 250,000 jobs – 25 times the number of jobs purportedly tied to the development of a new ICBM.¹⁰ Even a more modest investment in green manufacturing equivalent to the cost of the new ICBM would create a net increase of thousands of jobs compared to continuing work on the GBSD.

Just as canceling the new ICBM will have no economic impact on states hosting ICBM bases, nor would changes like adopting a no first use policy or taking ICBMs off of high alert status.

However, eliminating ICBMs altogether could put significant numbers of jobs at risk in the areas where these systems are based. While each case is unique, given adequate planning and coordination among key stakeholders, it is possible to develop economic alternatives. The Pentagon's Office of Economic Adjustment (OEA) – now known as the Office of Local Defense Community Cooperation (OLDCC) -- has written case studies of 35 successful base conversion examples in 19 states that resulted in a total of over 157,000 new civilian jobs after the closure of the facilities – more than twice the number of jobs that existed at the bases when they were closed.¹¹

The fate of the GBSD program could ultimately be determined by larger budgetary considerations. Trillion-dollar deficits and the need for additional spending to reverse a deep recession will put pressure on the Pentagon's top line, as will other priorities like pandemic response, combatting climate change, and addressing racial and economic inequality. The GBSD program will also feel pressure from within the Pentagon budget, as goals such as a 500 ship Navy, the purchase of 2,400 costly F-35 aircraft, and investments in a new refueling tanker, a new nuclear bomber, a new generation of unmanned vehicles, and increased spending on hypersonic weapons and artificial intelligence compete for funds with the new ICBM.

9. On jobs from defense versus other types of expenditure see Heidi Peltier, "War Spending and Lost Opportunities," Costs of War Project, Watson Institute, Brown University, March 2019, <https://watson.brown.edu/costsofwar/files/cow/imce/papers/2019/March%202019%20Job%20Opportunity%20Cost%20of%20War.pdf>

10. Heidi Peltier, "Cut Military Spending, Fund Green Manufacturing," Brown University Costs of War Project, November 13, 2019, <https://watson.brown.edu/costsofwar/files/cow/imce/papers/2019/Peltier%20Nov2019%20Short%20GND%20CoW.pdf>

11. U.S. Department of Defense, Office of Economic Adjustment, unpublished paper, October 2020.

The estimated \$264 billion price tag for developing, building, operating and maintaining the GBSB and related warheads may be a tempting budgetary target, especially in tandem with questions about its strategic value. Despite pressure from the ICBM lobby, the Biden administration should end the new ICBM program, both in the interests of reducing the risks of a nuclear conflict and of freeing up funds for more urgent national needs.

Recommendations

- Take existing ICBMs off of high alert. This would reduce the risks of an accidental launch of land-based nuclear missiles based on a false warning.
- Adopt a policy of no first use of nuclear weapons. This would provide an additional margin of safety to avoid a mistaken launch of nuclear weapons in a crisis without undermining U.S. deterrence.
- Forgo building a new ICBM and the related warhead, as a first step towards eliminating ICBMs from the U.S. nuclear force. Doing so could save over \$110 billion in procurement costs and \$264 billion in total costs, including deployment, operation, and maintenance.
- Provide federal transition assistance – both planning and financial – to communities impacted by the closing of ICBM bases, if ICBMs are eliminated from the arsenal.