Scientists Call for Canceling New Land Based Nuclear Missiles

To President Biden and Congress:

As scientists and engineers, we are acutely aware of the grave risk of nuclear war. We are particularly concerned about the needless dangers created by the deployment of expensive, dangerous, and unnecessary land-based, intercontinental-range ballistic missiles (ICBMs).

Expensive because in January 2024, the cost of the new U.S. ICBM program, Sentinel, rose 37 percent, to $131 billion for production alone. This represents a “critical breach” of the Nunn-McCurdy Act, mandating a formal re-evaluation of the program by the Pentagon, including an examination of reasonable alternatives. The Secretary of Defense must decide whether to go forward with the program or cancel it, then make that case to Congress.

Dangerous because silo-based missiles are vulnerable to a preemptive attack. As a result, the missiles are kept on “hair-trigger” alert so the president can launch them in less than five minutes, before they are destroyed. Past near misses, including false alarms, miscalculation, and misunderstanding, show how this high alert posture increases the risk of nuclear war, especially because the U.S. president can order the launch of nuclear weapons without consulting anyone else.

Also dangerous because silo-based missiles, deployed in North Dakota, Montana, Wyoming, Colorado, and Nebraska, are intended to act as a “sponge” to attract and soak up incoming nuclear-armed missiles so that they cannot be used on other targets. A recent study published in Scientific American indicated that several million people in the U.S. would be expected to die from the radioactive fallout from such an attack. These deaths could be anywhere in the contiguous United States depending on the weather. In other words, rather than fields of silos harmlessly absorbing an attack, millions of people would die.

Unnecessary because the United States deploys an assured ability to retaliate against a nuclear attack without land-based missiles. Roughly 1,000 nuclear warheads are deployed on U.S. submarines hidden at sea, essentially invulnerable to attack. Submarine-launched ballistic missiles are as accurate as silo-based missiles, quick to respond, and provide more destructive capability than could ever be employed effectively. Specifically, one nuclear detonation can destroy an entire city; hundreds or thousands of detonations would cause millions of immediate deaths, the destruction of critical infrastructure, and potentially catastrophic climate impacts. The U.S. Navy deploys twelve submarines and is working to replace the entire fleet. Silo-based missiles do not provide any important additional capability.

The Pentagon’s evaluation of the Sentinel ICBM program is expected to conclude in July 2024. Even if the Pentagon fails to provide alternatives, President Biden and Congress should examine this evaluation with a critical eye and incorporate the facts above in their decisions about the Sentinel program.

We call on President Biden and Congress to cancel the Sentinel program and to retire the U.S. land-based missile force. It is expensive, dangerous, and unnecessary. Such a decision will save Americans more than $100 billion and make the world safer.

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