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Opinion: Rethinking U.S. national security: masks, not missiles

Nuclear weapons won't play a role in fighting contemporary threats like the pandemic and climate change.

An Air Force Global Strike Command unarmed Minuteman III intercontinental ballistic missile launches during an operational test at 12:21 a.m. on Aug. 4 at Vandenberg Air Force Base, Calif. Its three reentry vehicles traveled 4,200 miles to the Kwajalein Atoll in the Marshall Islands as part of a developmental test. Officials say test launches are essential to sustaining the aging Minuteman 3 nuclear weapon system. (Senior Airman Hanah Abercrombie/U.S. Air Force via AP)



By [RO KHANNA](#) and [WILLIAM J. PERRY](#) | August 23, 2020 at 6:10 a.m.

Americans are facing one of the greatest challenges in our nation's history. More than 160,000 of our loved ones, friends and neighbors have died from COVID-19, surpassing all those who perished in every U.S. conflict after World War II combined. And yet Congress is about to authorize \$740 billion for the Pentagon next year without rethinking our approach to national security. We are still spending most of these dollars on yesterday's threats.

Who would have thought that the best defense against our greatest threat wouldn't be missiles and bombs but masks and ventilators? Yet here we are. Six months into this crisis, we still have our priorities backwards, buying missiles at the expense of masks with no end in sight.

In fact, the U.S. plans to spend more than a trillion dollars over the next 30 years modernizing its nuclear weapons as if the Cold War never ended, which it did 30 years ago. Yet nuclear weapons won't play a role in fighting contemporary threats to our safety such as the pandemic and climate change. The latter's stronger hurricanes and flooding left the Air Force with \$5 billion in damages to its bases last year. And we certainly can't afford new weapons that we don't need to keep us safe.

Key among these is the new Ground Based Strategic Deterrent (GBSD) missile, which the Pentagon wants to build to replace the existing Minuteman III nuclear-armed intercontinental ballistic missile (ICBM) and would cost \$85 billion to \$150 billion in a hastily expedited sole-source contract with Northrop Grumman.

This spending does not advance our national security. Our existing, advanced sea and air-based nuclear weapons can more than protect our nation and retain our second-strike capability if attacked. In

contrast, ground-based ICBMs are destabilizing and increase the risk of an accidental nuclear war. Unlike submarines at sea and bombers in flight, the locations of our fixed-site ICBMs are known, making them sitting ducks to a Russian attack.

In response, the president would have just minutes to decide whether to launch ICBMs before they are destroyed in their silos, greatly increasing the risk of starting a nuclear war by mistake. Once launched, they cannot be recalled. Before he was secretary of defense, General James Mattis asked in 2016 testimony to the Senate Armed Services Committee, “Is it time to reduce the triad to a dyad, removing the land-based missiles? This would reduce the false alarm danger.”

Americans agree. A recent multi-year study of 86,000 individuals by the Program for Public Consultation at the University of Maryland found that 61% of all respondents (69% of Democrats and 53% of Republicans) support phasing out the land-based missiles instead of replacing them.

But even if we do keep these destabilizing weapons, we most certainly do not need to spend billions of dollars on a new generation of missiles. The service life of the existing Minuteman III can be extended through 2036 for \$37 billion less than deploying a new missile, according to the Congressional Budget Office.

Pausing the new ICBM is not unilateral nuclear disarmament, as some have argued. It is not a concession to Russia or China. The U.S. would still preserve exactly as many nuclear weapons as it has today, which is more than enough to deter a Russian or Chinese attack. The highest probability of starting a nuclear war is not an intentional attack by Russia or China but rather a mistaken launch caused by a false alarm and a rushed decision to launch ICBMs. That decision would be made solely by the president, with no second opinion required from anyone.

This nation faces major challenges and tough choices in the recovery ahead. We shouldn't spend our limited resources on new weapons that we don't need and could potentially make us less safe. Instead we must redirect these tax dollars to helping families and saving our planet. These are the highest priorities and where we should focus America's defense investments. It is time to put masks before missiles.

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