

United States Senate

WASHINGTON, DC 20510

September 25, 2019

The Honorable Mark Esper
Secretary of Defense
1000 Defense Pentagon
Washington, DC 20301

Dear Secretary Esper:

We write to emphasize the importance of delivering the Air Force's long-overdue Intercontinental Ballistic Missile (ICBM) replacement effort, the Ground Based Strategic Deterrent (GBSD) program, on time. We appreciate your commitment to the critical role GBSD will play in maintaining a safe, reliable, and effective nuclear deterrent for decades to come, and ask that you ensure the GBSD stays on track for initial operational capability (IOC) in 2029. We are aware of recent calls to modify the GBSD acquisition strategy, but whether the Air Force chooses to retain its current approach or make modifications, we stress that we simply cannot afford any delays in this program.

Our adversaries, including Russia, China, Iran, and North Korea, continue to pursue their nuclear ambitions, whether to develop more advanced capabilities or obtain their first nuclear weapon. To deter a nuclear attack on the United States and its allies in today's multipolar nuclear security environment, comprehensive U.S. nuclear modernization to include each leg of the triad is necessary.

As you know, the ground-based leg, comprised of hundreds of widely-dispersed U.S. ICBM silos, presents our adversaries with an essentially impossible targeting problem and affords the U.S. President the ability to respond immediately in any crisis. Moreover, the U.S. ICBM force provides a hedge against both technical failure in other parts of the U.S. deterrent and unexpected technical advancements by potential adversaries.

Yet, our ICBM fleet is operating well beyond its intended service life. Component aging and inventory attrition are threatening the viability of our Minuteman III force. In 2012, the previous administration undertook a review of modernization options for the nuclear enterprise and concluded that the 1970s-era Minuteman III ICBM system should be replaced. Air Force analysis – along with multiple independent studies – concluded that further service life extensions of the Minuteman III system would be expensive and still would fail to overcome adversary missile defenses and other threats to the safety and reliability of the missile system. The 2018 Nuclear Posture Review again reaffirmed the problems with attempting to extend the Minuteman III's service life and the need to proceed with the GBSD program expeditiously.

There is no slack in the GBSD schedule. We are committed to providing the funding required to support reaching IOC in 2029. With these resources, we ask that you ensure the program meets its milestones on time, including reaching Milestone B and beginning the Engineering and Manufacturing Development phase by the fourth quarter of Fiscal Year 2020. This deadline is critical to keeping the program on track for the next several years.

Modernizing the ground-based leg of the triad is necessary for 21st century nuclear deterrence. Any delay in the GBSD program will risk undermining the future deterrent capability the United States needs to defend its homeland and its allies. We appreciate the Air Force's commitment to modernizing the U.S. ICBM force and ask that you work to ensure the GBSD program is not disrupted or delayed.

Sincerely,



John Hoeven
U.S. Senator



Mike Lee
U.S. Senator



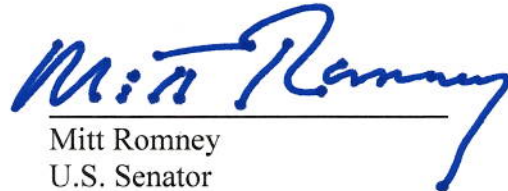
John Barrasso
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Michael B. Enzi
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Steve Daines
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Mitt Romney
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Kevin Cramer
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Jon Tester
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