

November 18, 2011

The Honorable Leon Panetta
Secretary of Defense
1000 Defense Pentagon
Washington, DC 20301-1000

Dear Secretary Panetta:

I write to request that you reconsider your statement that the Department of Defense would place the nation's entire intercontinental ballistic missile (ICBM) fleet on the chopping block if the Joint Select Committee on Deficit Reduction fails to produce enough savings to avoid a sequester in Fiscal Year (FY) 2013 and lower security budget caps for FY14-21.

There's little doubt that a sequester require the Department of Defense and other agencies to make very difficult choices. That is why I am repeatedly urging my colleagues to "go big" with a grand bargain that reforms mandatory programs and increases revenues so that the burden of deficit reduction does not fall disproportionately on defense or other appropriated accounts.

However, even recognizing the tough decisions that you would face under a sequester, it's still a shock to hear the Pentagon say that the ICBM is a good place to find short-term savings. This total reversal of our long-held and successful nuclear deterrent strategy would create unnecessary strategic danger; moreover, it does not make fiscal sense. ICBMs require just one-third to one-fifth the annual operating cost of the submarine-launched leg of the triad, and around one-third the cost per warhead. And since the ICBM force is currently in the final stages of a decade-long effort to replace and modernize critical components, it will be extremely cost-effective to maintain the Minuteman III fleet through 2030 as planned. The ICBM force is the best deal in the nuclear triad: it would literally be a bargain at more than twice the price.

Your letter mentioning the ICBM force as a target for cuts estimates that the decision would lead to \$8 billion in savings. But base closures traditionally take more time and cost more money than projected, something especially true with regard to ICBMs as a result of environmental remediation and other costs of eliminating nuclear infrastructure. By contrast, you estimate that delaying procurement of an Ohio-class ballistic missile submarine replacement and reducing the buy by two boats would save an estimated \$7 billion. This estimate seems on the low end, given the Navy is currently working to bring the cost for just one boat down from \$5.6 billion.

Yet even if a person takes the Department's estimates at face value, eliminating the ICBM force would save only \$1 billion more over ten years than slightly delaying and reducing the ballistic missile submarine buy. Given the much lower operations and maintenance costs for the ICBM force, it becomes clear that reducing the submarine buy produces greater savings over the longer term than completely eliminating the ICBM force. While I dislike the idea of any nuclear reductions outside arms control agreements, this shift in force structure would be immeasurably less destabilizing and risky than further reductions to – let alone the complete elimination of – the land-based force.

I recently led seven of my colleagues to ask that you maintain at least the 420 ICBMs on alert and 450 silos in a warm status allowed by the New START agreements. We did so because a dispersed, sizable, and single-warhead loaded ICBM force stabilizes the world, deterring near-peer competitors and dissuading others from growing their own nuclear forces by making a theoretical preemptive or attrition

attack nearly impossible. These attributes, like the well-known complementary nature of the triad, become even more important as America's nuclear forces are reduced.

Leon, I know you concluded your letters to Senators McCain and Graham by stating that "a sequestration budget is not one that I could recommend," and your point was that a failure to act to prevent a sequester would be devastating to our national security. That point came through loud and clear. That is why I still want to "go big" on a deficit deal. But even the difficult fiscal situation we face must not be allowed to supersede the irreplaceable strategic contributions that the ICBM force provides to our nation.

The 2010 Nuclear Posture Review stated that "retaining all three Triad legs will best maintain strategic stability at reasonable cost." Just as importantly, it stated that "any future nuclear reductions must continue to strengthen deterrence of potential regional adversaries, strategic stability vis-à-vis Russia and China, and assurance of our allies and partners." I understand and accept that a new review of our deterrence policy is underway. But it is not complete, and even if it were, few would take it seriously if it were to argue that Iran's ongoing efforts toward a nuclear weapon and North Korea, China, and even Pakistan and India's recent re-emphasis of nuclear arsenals warrant a decision for the United States to begin to unilaterally disarm, let alone to completely eliminate one leg of the triad.

Many have correctly argued that a "peanut butter spread" of cuts is not an appropriate approach, and it is especially critical that we not allow even the great fiscal pressures we face today to take the place of sound strategic planning when it comes to our nuclear deterrent. That is why I ask that you protect the 420-missile and 450-silo ICBM force from cuts outside the arms control process, and refrain from considering our nation's most cost-effective and stabilizing nuclear deterrent as a bill-payer when considering reductions to the defense budget.

Thank you for your time and ongoing attention to this matter.