

Nuclear Weapon Modernization

Nuclear deterrence is a top priority mission of the Department of War, the Department of the Air Force and the nation.

The nuclear deterrent underwrites every U.S. military operation throughout the world — it is the backstop and foundation of our national defense and the defense of our allies and undergirds all National Defense Strategy priorities.

The U.S. strategic nuclear triad remains capable, flexible, resilient and ready, but it must be modernized to maintain a credible deterrent against current and emerging threats.

As the 2026 National Defense Strategy states, “The United States requires a strong, secure and effective nuclear arsenal adapted to the nation’s overall and defense strategies. We will modernize and adapt our nuclear forces accordingly with focused attention on deterrence and escalation management amidst the changing global nuclear landscape. The United States should never — will never — be left vulnerable to nuclear blackmail.”

The sustainment and modernization of nuclear weapons; delivery platforms; and nuclear command, control and communications are ongoing and will remain a small fraction of the DoW budget: about 8.4 percent of total defense spending, for about 10 years, according to the Congressional Budget Office.

This level of spending compares favorably to 10.6 percent of the DoD budget in the 1980s and 17.1 percent in the early 1960s.

The way in which we acquire weapon systems, by managing cost, schedule and performance, continues to evolve in order to deliver world-class capabilities and ensure our operators’ dominance in air and space.

“We want the world’s most robust, credible, and modern nuclear deterrent ... to protect the American people, American assets overseas, and American allies.”

2025 National Security Strategy

Strategic Nuclear Triad

1. Land-Based Force

- Most responsive leg.
- With the Air Force’s 400 ICBMs, no adversary can disarm the U.S. nuclear deterrent without attacking hundreds of targets simultaneously.

2. Air-Based Force

- Most visible and flexible leg.
- Sixty nuclear-capable bombers are a clear and visible signal of U.S. intent and resolve during a crisis.
- Forward-deployed dual capable aircraft strengthen the coherence of NATO’s nuclear and non-nuclear capabilities and mutually supportive concepts.

3. Sea-Based Force

- Most survivable leg.
- With 240 SLBMs, a portion of the Navy’s nuclear always on patrol, making them very difficult to find and track.

The bottom line is taking away one triad leg, or failing to modernize it, reduces the effectiveness of our nuclear deterrence. The United States must maintain a flexible nuclear capability that deters adversaries who pose a threat to our nation’s existence, regardless of their perceived willingness to launch a nuclear attack.

The triad remains capable, flexible, resilient and ready, but it must be modernized to maintain a credible deterrent.

What we have today is the minimum needed. What we need tomorrow is a fully modernized nuclear triad and NC3.

“As long as nuclear weapons exist, the fundamental role of U.S. nuclear weapons is to deter nuclear attack on the United States, our allies, and partners.”

2022 Nuclear Posture Review



Nuclear Modernization: Key to Strategic Deterrence



Air Force Nuclear Weapons Center

MORE INFO

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NEVER DOUBTED ★ ALWAYS FEARED



National Defense Strategy

The 2026 National Defense Strategy sets out the following lines of effort:

- Defend the U.S. homeland
- Deter China in the Indo-Pacific through strength, not confrontation
- Increase burden-sharing with U.S. allies and partners
- Supercharge the U.S. defense industrial base

In pursuit of these objectives, the United States will:

- Secure our borders
- Counter narco-terrorists in the hemisphere
- Secure key terrain in the Western hemisphere
- Defend America's skies with President Trump's Golden Dome for America and other, drone-specific measures
- **Modernize and adapt U.S. nuclear forces**
- Deter and defend against cyber threats
- Counter Islamic terrorists

"We will maintain a robust and modern nuclear deterrent capable of addressing the strategic threats to our country."

2026 National Defense Strategy

AFNWC

The Air Force Nuclear Weapons Center is the nuclear-focused center within Air Force Materiel Command synchronizing all aspects of nuclear materiel management on behalf of the AFMC commander and in direct support of Air Force Global Strike Command.

- **Mission:** Deliver nuclear capabilities warfighters use every day to deter and assure.
- **Vision:** Ensuring our nation's most powerful weapon systems are never doubted, always feared.
- **Motto:** "Never Doubted, Always Feared"

Major Organizations

The **Air Delivered Capabilities Directorate** is responsible for delivering, sustaining and supporting air-delivered nuclear weapon systems for our warfighters to secure the future of our nation and our allies every day. Programs managed by the directorate include: B61-13 and tail kit, Long Range Standoff Weapon, W80-4 Life Extension Program, Weapon Storage and Security System, Secure Transportable Maintenance System, Protective Aircraft Shelter Interior Intrusion Detection System, and Air-Launched Cruise Missile (AGM-86B) sustainment.

The **Intercontinental Ballistic Missile Systems Directorate** is responsible for the land-based leg of the nuclear triad, which includes the modernization

and sustainment of intercontinental ballistic missiles and associated weapon system command and control, flight and launch systems, missile silos, and other ground infrastructure. The directorate is responsible for providing the most responsive capability and backbone of nuclear deterrence through two program offices: the Minuteman III (LGM-30G) and Sentinel (LGM-35A).

The **Nuclear Command, Control and Communications Integration Directorate** is responsible for integrating the NC3 Weapon System (AN/USQ.225) across the Air Force. The directorate advises AFGSC on the NC3 Weapon System's technical architecture while informing key decisions regarding investment and modernization. It is also responsible for the weapon system's configuration management, system test, system verification, and system certification.

The **Nuclear Technology and Integration Directorate** is responsible for providing intelligence support to AFNWC, analyzing the full spectrum of weapons effects to support acquisition programs and inform tactics and procedures, and assessing current and future nuclear systems to identify and mitigate potential vulnerabilities. It is also responsible for managing the Air Force's Nuclear Certification Program.