



Importance of the Nuclear Triad

The Triad Has Stood the Test of Time

For more than six decades, the U.S. has emphasized the need for a nuclear force that credibly deters adversaries, assures allies and partners, and would achieve U.S. objectives should deterrence fail. Since the 1960s, these objectives have been met by the U.S. nuclear triad through forces operating at sea, on land, and in the air. Today's nuclear triad consists of:

- ◆ 14 ballistic missile submarines (SSBNs) armed with 240 submarine-launched ballistic missiles
- ◆ 400 land-based intercontinental ballistic missiles (ICBMs)
- ◆ 60 nuclear-capable heavy bomber aircraft capable of delivering gravity bombs and cruise missiles

These strategic forces are enabled by a secure nuclear command and control system and supplemented by a small number of non-strategic nuclear forces that provide an ability to forward-deploy forces in Europe and globally.

Complementary Attributes for Robust Deterrence

Each leg of the triad provides unique and complementary attributes. Collectively, the triad seeks to ensure that no adversary believes it could launch a strategic attack that eliminates the United States' ability to respond and inflict unacceptable damage—for any reason, under any circumstances.

SSBNs are survivable

A portion of the SSBN fleet is always on patrol, making them very difficult to track and therefore highly survivable.

ICBMs are responsive

ICBMs are deployed in hundreds of silos and can be launched and reach targets within minutes, creating a nearly insurmountable targeting problem for adversaries.

Bombers are visible

Bombers are a clear and visible signal of U.S. intent and resolve during a crisis and provide a variety of deployment and yield options when placed on alert.

Eliminating a leg of the triad would weaken the combined strength of the force and simplify adversary attack planning. For example, without U.S. ICBMs an adversary could potentially destroy all U.S. strategic nuclear forces by attacking fewer than ten targets—rather than hundreds of targets dispersed over several thousand square miles. Also, the triad's diversity enables mitigation of risk if a particular leg of the triad is degraded or unavailable.

Most of the systems that compose the triad are operating well beyond their original design lives—they must be modernized or they will be lost. With foreign nuclear threats growing, the importance of the triad endures.

“Based on the collection of potential threats and adversaries that exist in the world, the Joint Chiefs affirmed the necessity to maintain a triad and to modernize the weapon systems, the indications and warning, and the command and control associated with that triad...We believe the triad is foundational to deterrence. It's not about how we view the triad; it's how our potential adversaries view the triad.”

– General Paul Selva, Vice Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff