



# MITCHELL INSTITUTE

## Policy Paper

### Key Points

Recapitalizing the three legs of the nuclear triad is an incredibly consequential decision. This is especially true in an era where peer competition is accelerating and aggressive states like Iran and North Korea harbor nuclear aspirations.

Due to its breadth, cost, and how deeply it will impact U.S. security, it is important to understand and account for current public perception regarding this decision.

While much of the current political debate does appear to broadly reflect the sentiments of citizens around the country, this sentiment is often overwhelmed by advocacy talking points from the arms control community and opposing strategic nuclear deterrence advocates.

Mitchell Institute commissioned a poll to objectively measure public sentiment on a range of issues tied to strategic nuclear deterrence.

Polling suggests the following:

- U.S. military superiority and military spending directly contribute to Americans' sense of safety and security.
- Americans agree that a modern deterrence system is critical to our national safety and security and should be one of the highest priorities for the Department of Defense.
- After being given baseline context about current ICBM lifecycle and capabilities, voters would prefer that the missiles be replaced with a modern system rather than being refurbished or phased out.
- Most voters support either increasing or continuing the current level of spending on nuclear deterrence—specifically on ground-based strategic deterrence.

## Understanding American Voters' Sentiment on Strategic Nuclear Deterrence

By the Mitchell Institute Staff

### About the Survey

The lens through which the American public views national security has fundamentally changed since the end of the Cold War. Impactful changes include demographics, generational shifts, domestic priorities, technology, and the realities posed by the threat environment. As a democracy, how American citizens think about defense influences the strategies, operational concepts, and technologies available to the nation. Nowhere is this more evident than with nuclear weapons and capabilities related to strategic deterrence.

While national sentiment is a key factor shaping defense decisions, Mitchell Institute has also long-observed that the overt public discourse regarding nuclear weapons often reflects a static, entrenched debate by two fixed camps—the arms control community and advocates of a modern nuclear triad. Talking points from both sides have changed little over the decades and are often reflected in the political debates surrounding the topic.

Recognizing that the recapitalization of the nuclear triad represents one of the most critical national security decisions facing the nation, Mitchell Institute believed it was important to objectively research current public perceptions regarding modernization of the nuclear enterprise. Mitchell Institute favors triad modernization, but also understands that unbiased, accurate data reflecting public sentiment is an essential factor to consider.

To achieve this, Mitchell Institute partnered with Seven Letter Insight to conduct a poll of American voters' sentiment toward strategic nuclear deterrence, with special focus on its future ground-based ICBM capabilities. Seven Letter Insight conducted this poll online among 2,150 likely voters with regional oversamples in key states. It has a margin of error of +/- 2.1 percent and was fielded in late August 2021. Data was slightly weighted to ensure that the sample reflects the overall voting population in terms of age, race, gender, political party, and other factors.

# QUANTITATIVE: NATIONAL VOTER SAMPLE BREAKDOWN: N=2150

(N = 2150 | Fielded 8-10-21 to 8-23-21 | M.o.E +/- 2.1%)

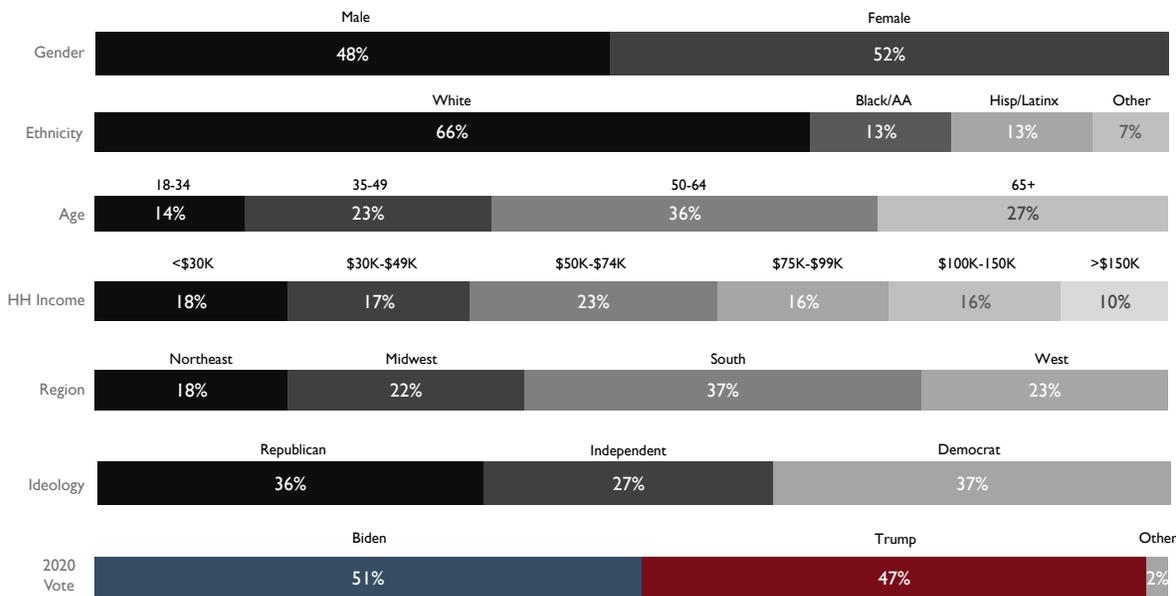


Figure 1: Mitchell Institute sought to understand public attitudes regarding national security as a whole and strategic nuclear deterrence in particular. The survey sample generally reflects the demographic composition of who participated in the 2020 presidential election. While the composition of citizens engaged in the political process is constantly evolving, this reflects the most recent known national baseline.

Credit: Seven Letter Insight

## The Changing Landscape

For nearly 70 years, America’s nuclear triad has served as the backstop of our national security and foundation of defense policy. Nuclear missile-armed submarines and strategic bombers ensure we can strike anywhere, at any time. Land-based intercontinental ballistic missiles (ICBMs) are deployed in hundreds of silos and can reach potential adversary targets in minutes, posing an insurmountable problem for potential aggressors. While a focused attack by an enemy could conceivably impede the submarine and bomber legs of the triad, the hardened and dispersed nature of ICBMs would require an adversary to commit to a massive attack on the continental United States. That is a significant threshold for any adversary to cross and requires serious risk calculus on their part.

This three-fold system, empowered by a robust command and control enterprise, forms America’s strategic nuclear forces and actualizes the core of deterrence theory.

Given the end of the Cold War in 1991 and the subsequent focus on combat operations in Afghanistan, Iraq, Libya, Syria, and elsewhere over the past twenty years, little public attention has been

focused on the triad and strategic deterrence. However, given the rapid modernization of the nuclear forces of nations such as Russia and China, as well as the nuclear aspirations of North Korea and Iran, ensuring America possesses a modern strategic nuclear deterrent force is an increasingly important issue.

With the components of all legs of our nuclear triad reaching the end of their reliable and useful lives, nuclear modernization efforts have been studied and deemed necessary by multiple presidential administrations. While modernization programs for all three legs of the triad are currently underway, there has been some criticism that nuclear weapons may be less valuable given globalization and the interconnectedness of economies, or that modernization is simply unaffordable. In a comprehensive cost-benefit analysis, U.S. military leaders and civilian defense officials have determined that the cost of supporting old and outdated nuclear systems is becoming prohibitive. Similar to conventional weapons systems, an evolving threat environment also demands new capabilities fundamentally not available in current strategic nuclear triad systems.

At the same time the security environment is shifting, so are American views regarding national

security. The polling data below reflects Mitchell Institute’s attempt to better understand public attitude regarding the security environment and strategic nuclear deterrence in particular. A significant portion of this research focused on the Ground Based Strategic Deterrent (GBSD) element of this modernization, as it reflects one of the more politically controversial elements of the modernization effort. This data is not meant to reflect long-entrenched advocacy positions of the two respective sides of this debate, but instead provide insights regarding the views of Americans outside the Washington D.C. region.

Mitchell’s intent is to make this research available to the public—especially to both sides of the ongoing

debate. The following charts provides the raw survey results. The data indicates that U.S. military superiority and military spending directly contribute to Americans’ sense of safety and security. The survey’s voter sample agree that a modern deterrence system is critical and should be one of the highest priorities for the Department of Defense. And, after being given baseline information on America’s current ICBM capabilities, voters would prefer that the missiles be replaced with a modern system rather than being refurbished or phased out. Finally, most voters are supportive of either increasing or continuing the current level of spending on nuclear deterrence—specifically on ground-based strategic deterrence. 🌟

## Survey—Key Findings

### National Security

#### MILITARY SUPERIORITY ABSOLUTELY CONTRIBUTES TO SENSE OF SECURITY:

*It’s one thing to show that military superiority makes us feel safer – but theoretically removing that superiority catalyzes a drastic shift in opinion showing that Americans DO derive a significant portion of their sense of security from military superiority.*

*Does knowing that the United States has global military superiority make you feel more safe, less safe or does it not make a difference?*

*If China or Russia had global military superiority would that make you feel more safe, less safe or does it not make a difference?*

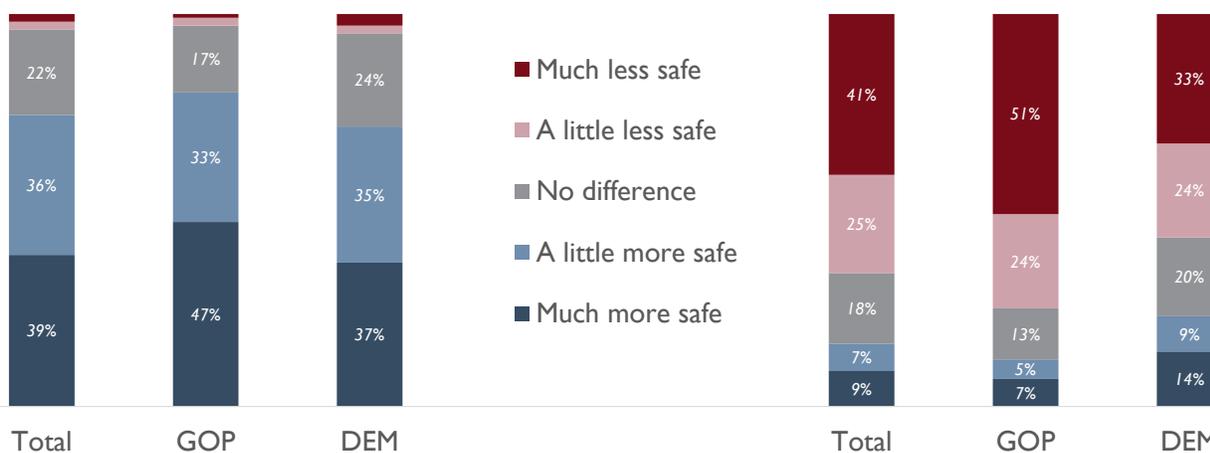


Figure 2: It is interesting to note the near parity of polling data across the parties when it comes to the value of U.S. military superiority. However, it is very instructive to note the difference in perception regarding what would happen if Russia or China possessed a decisive security advantage over the United States. While a majority in both parties agree that such circumstances would make the United States “Much Less Safe” or “A Little Less Safe,” the higher percentage of Democrats who think such a condition would yield no impact or actually improve security is notable. This suggests the defense community should consider increasing fact-based education efforts to inform Americans about the threat Russia and China’s military modernization pose to important U.S. interests.

Credit: Seven Letter Insight

## SPENDING ON NATIONAL DEFENSE INCREASES FEELINGS OF SECURITY.

77% of Republican voters and 62% of Democratic voters agree.

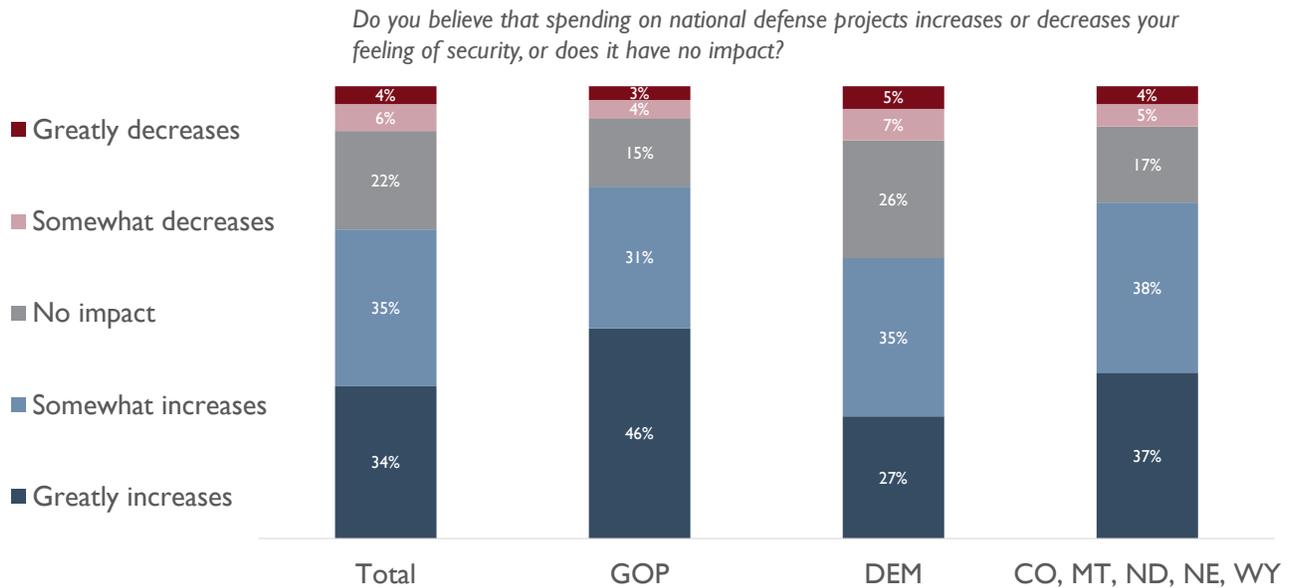


Figure 3: Results of this poll demonstrate relative equity spanning party affiliation of how defense spending contributes to a sense of security. These perceptions also extend to the states that host the ground based strategic deterrent. Such attitudes may explain why Congress has demonstrated an increased willingness to invest in defense beyond levels requested by the White House. It also suggests a divide may exist between vocal defense skeptics in both parties and the majority bipartisan position of voters across the country.

Credit: Seven Letter Insight

## Nuclear Deterrence

**91%**

of voters agree that nuclear deterrence capability is critical to our national safety and security and that it should be one of the highest priorities of the Department of Defense.

Over half **STRONGLY** agree.

Do you agree or disagree with the following statement?  
**"America's nuclear deterrence capability is critical to our national safety and security. It should be one of the highest priorities of the Department of Defense."**

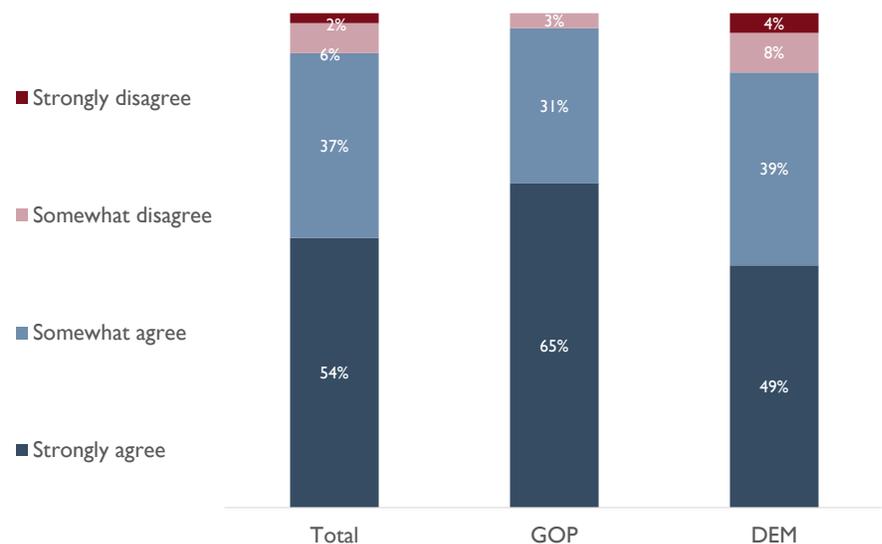


Figure 4: Thirty years have transpired since the end of the Cold War and a nation-wide focus on the value afforded by strategic deterrence. Concerns regarding terrorism, cyber security, and space have dominated the news cycle for many years, with nuclear issues a distant conversation topic. This poll suggests an enduring respect for the deterrent value these tools afford for the nation.

Credit: Seven Letter Insight

## SECURITY > COST FOR 8-IN-10 VOTERS.

When given a discrete choice between framing the value in terms of security versus cost, voters overwhelmingly choose security.

Which comes closest to your opinion?

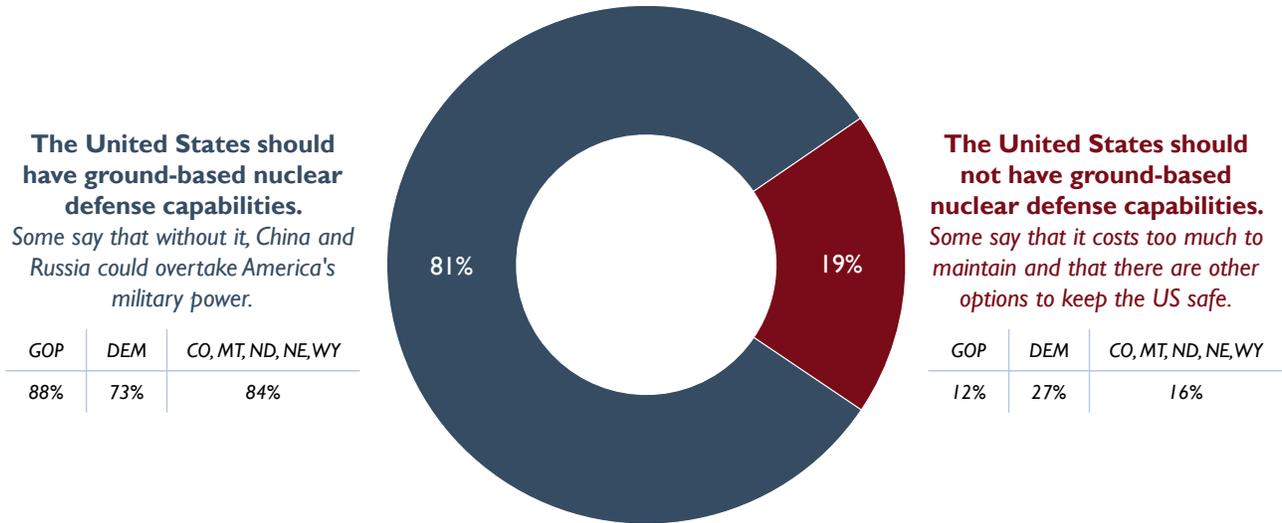


Figure 5: It is interesting to note that these two questions, which include pro and con shaping messages often seen in the ongoing debates, yield an overwhelming response favoring a modern ground-based capability. These results match attitudes found elsewhere in the poll data and suggest that while the arms community may be highly vocal and have powerful political allies, their encompassing position is not shared on a broad national basis.

Credit: Seven Letter Insight

## A MAJORITY OF AMERICANS SUPPORT ICBM MODERNIZATION.

When told how old the current Minuteman III missiles and supporting systems are, most identify replacement as the best potential solution.

The current US ground-based intercontinental ballistic missiles (ICBMs) that are used for our ground-based nuclear response capabilities are all over 50 years old and require attention in order to function correctly.  
**Based on this information, which statement do you agree with most?**

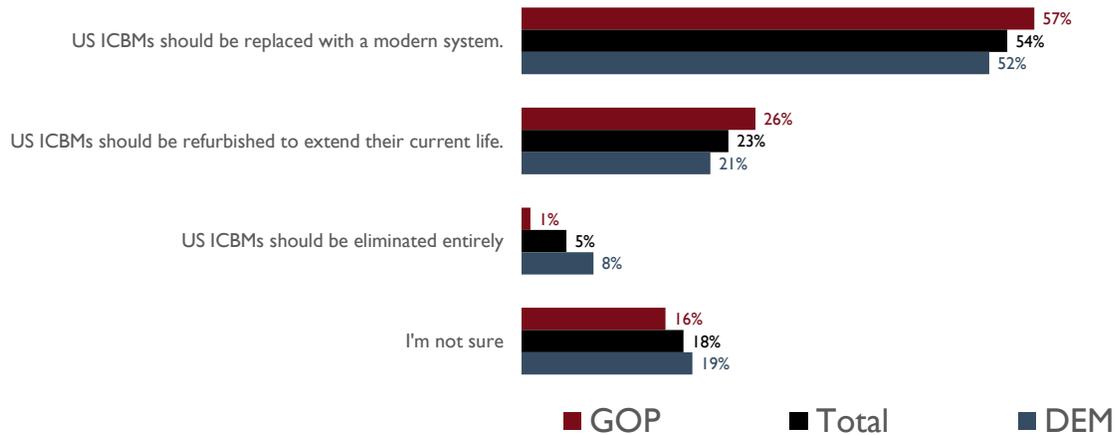
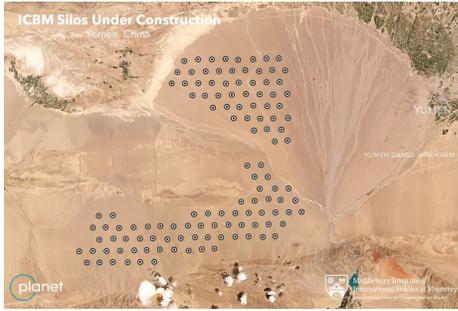


Figure 6: The debate surrounding modernization for the ground-based strategic deterrent comes down to two main options: 1) an entirely new system in the form of GBSD, or 2) refurbishing the existing Minuteman III missile force. It is interesting to note the overwhelming favorability of a new replacement solution when poll participants understand the advanced age of the current system. This and other data from the survey suggest that citizens assume U.S. military capabilities are far newer than they actually are. This point of data has particular relevance for the U.S. Air Force and suggests that explaining the current age of the aircraft inventory may be a very important discussion point to help facilitate robust recapitalization.

Credit: Seven Letter Insight

# WHEN VOTERS SEE CHINA'S NEW SILO CONSTRUCTION...

...fully two-thirds support replacement of US ICBMs with a modernized system.



Here is a photo of the 100 new missile silos China is currently building, which signal a major expansion of China's ground-based nuclear capabilities. Based on this information, which statement do you agree with most?

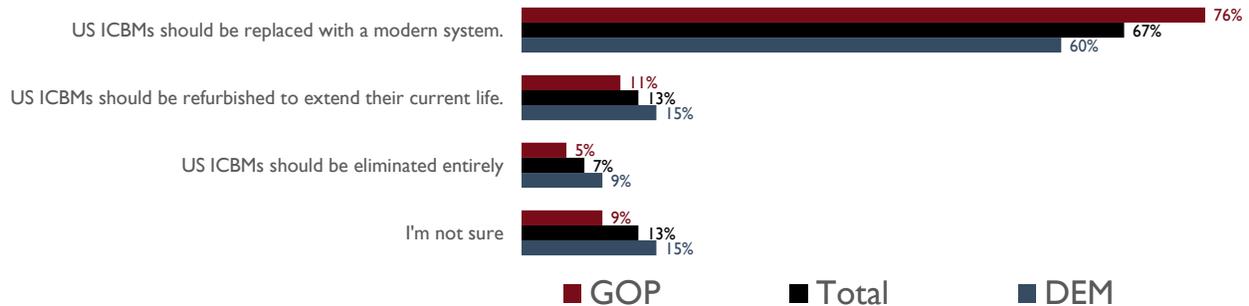


Figure 7: Threat context appears to be compelling to poll participants. U.S. defense leaders should take this into consideration as they explain why the nation needs to modernize its strategic nuclear deterrence enterprise. Significant investment by China, Russia, Iran, and North Korea in their respective nuclear weapons capabilities is a undeniable fact, but may not be well understood in the public domain.

Credit: Seven Letter Insight

## IMPACT ON FEELINGS OF SECURITY:

80% of polled voters say that replacing ICBMs with modern technology would make them feel safer. Just over half (56%) say that refurbishing current ICBMs would make them feel safer. And 18% believe it would make them feel less safe.

Regardless of how safe you consider the United States to be currently, would the following make you feel more safe, less safe, or have no impact? (Displaying total numbers only)

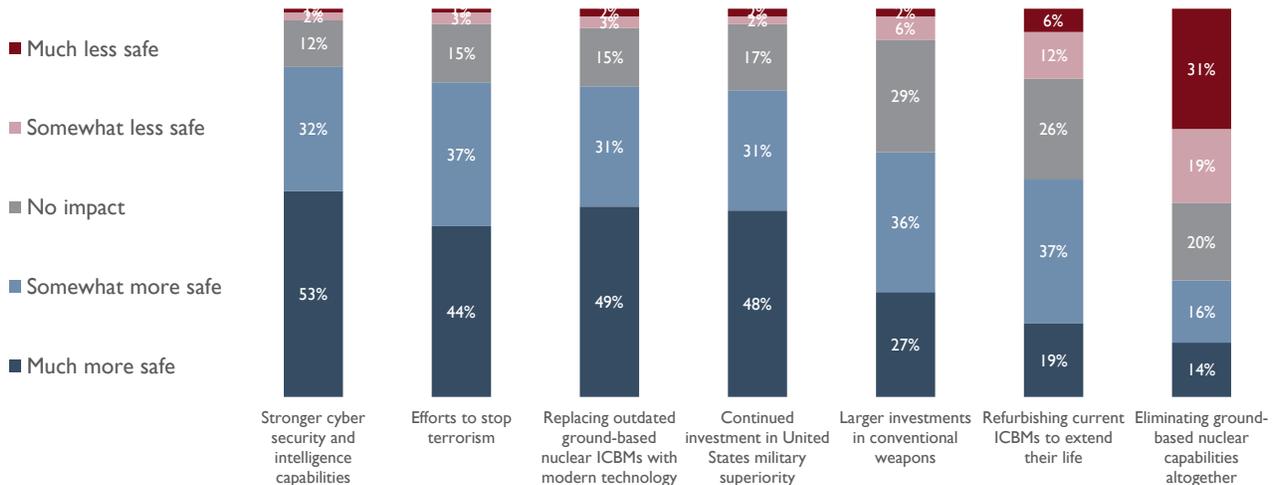


Figure 8: It is understandable that poll participants would value investment in cyber security and options to address terrorism. Recent events, the long-standing nature of these threats, and the very real danger they pose to the country are apparent to most. However, investment in nuclear capabilities polls quite favorably. This was an outcome the Mitchell Institute team did not necessarily expect given the robust activity of the arms control community and their political advocates. In addition, strategic nuclear deterrence has not been a high-profile news story outside the national security community in many years.

Credit: Seven Letter Insight

## 8-in-10 BELIEVE SPENDING ON MODERN NUCLEAR CAPABILITY IS JUSTIFIED.

A majority of members polled from both parties agree.

Which statement do you agree with MORE?

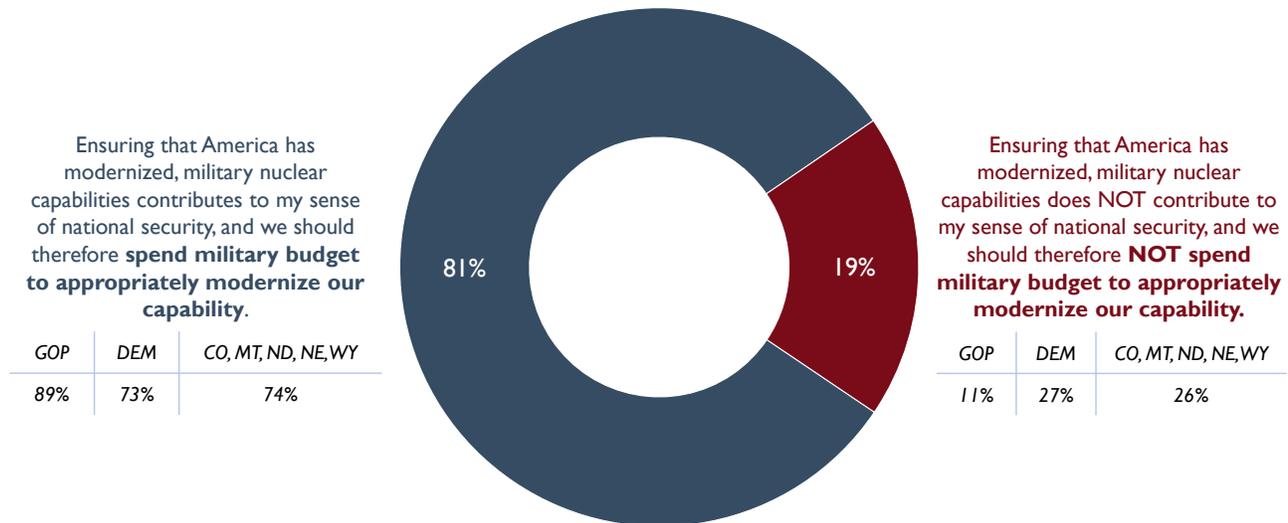


Figure 9: Both response options in this question establish context. The result suggests an overwhelming recognition of the value provided by strategic nuclear deterrence capabilities. Furthermore, this data suggests that there is continued political support for triad modernization.

Credit: Seven Letter Insight

## VOTERS DON'T HAVE A PROBLEM WITH SPENDING ON DETERRENCE.

87% of Republican voters and 75% of Democratic voters want to spend more or the same amount on nuclear deterrence.

Nuclear deterrence makes up less than 5% of our total defense budget. Should we continue to devote this percentage to nuclear deterrence?

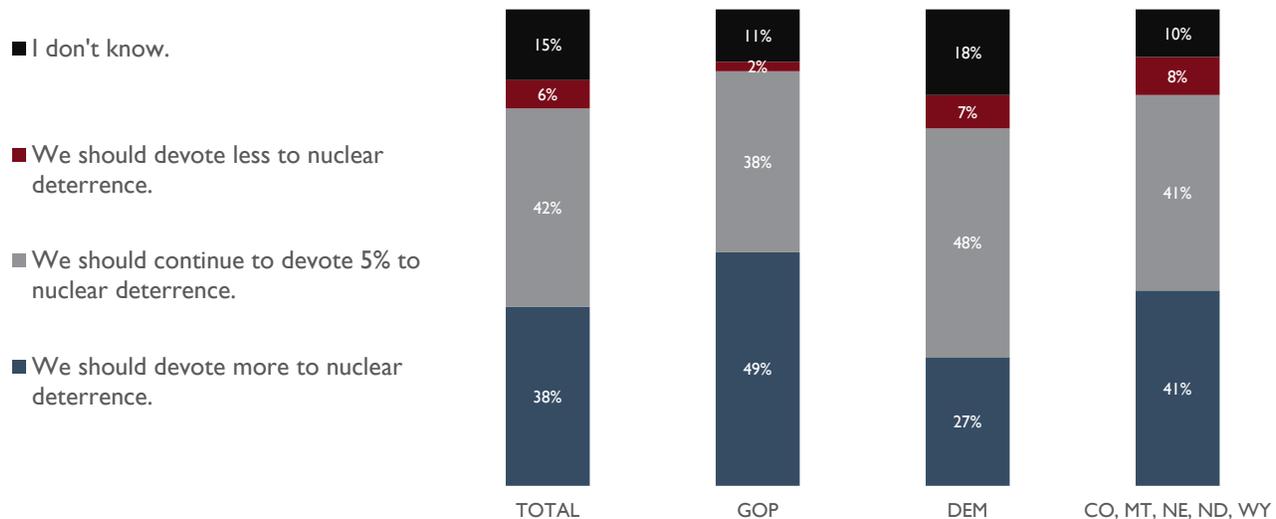


Figure 10: The percentage of individuals favoring “devote more to nuclear deterrence” or “continue to devote 5 percent to deterrence” is an instructive indicator regarding public perceptions even in a time of ballooning federal deficits, pandemic, and real defense budget cuts. Approximately four in five individuals of the polled group supported giving an equal or greater share of the defense budget to nuclear deterrence, and there was only a small difference based on party affiliation.

Credit: Seven Letter Insight

## About The Mitchell Institute

The Mitchell Institute educates about aerospace power's contribution to America's global interests, informs policy and budget deliberations, and cultivates the next generation of thought leaders to exploit the advantages of operating in air, space, and cyberspace.

## About the Series

The Mitchell Institute Policy Papers present new thinking and policy proposals to respond to the emerging security and aerospace power challenges of the 21st century. These papers are written for lawmakers and their staffs, policy professionals, business and industry, academics, journalists, and the informed public. The series aims to provide in-depth policy insights and perspectives based on the experiences of the authors, along with studious supporting research.

For media inquiries, email our publications team at [publications.mitchellaerospacepower@afa.org](mailto:publications.mitchellaerospacepower@afa.org)

Copies of Policy Papers can be downloaded under the publications tab on the Mitchell Institute website at <https://www.mitchellaerospacepower.org>

