

# THE NATIONAL INTEREST

## America's Next Stealth Bomber: A Nuclear-Armed Bomber?

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Recapitalizing the air-breathing segment of the American nuclear triad has generally not been the U.S. Air Force's first argument for developing its new Long-Range Strike Bomber (LRS-B). Sustaining a global capacity for massive, repeated, marginally economical surgical strikes has long been the core of the argument. But nuclear certification is planned for 2027, just two years after the Air Force's declaration of initial operating capability in 2025. Eliminating the immediate nuclear requirement would save some money in the beginning, but only a small fraction of the cost of the whole program. For this reason, adding nuclear capability to the LRS-B continues to be programmatically appealing. The bigger question, however, may be how useful the LRS-B is for American nuclear strategy.

We have heard the argument that the bomber force is a useful signal of the potential for nuclear escalation in a crisis. The United States sometimes does forward-deploy B-2s and B-52s to airfields in the United Kingdom or Guam, to send strong messages to Russia, China, or North Korea—or any other country from which political or military leaders haphazardly threaten nuclear attacks on Warsaw, Los Angeles, or Austin. We say possibly because it's unclear just how seriously that posturing is taken. Otherwise, a nuclear-armed bomber force makes little marginal contribution to deterring a large-scale nuclear attack. Without wartime dispersal, airfields for USAF bombers comprise just five well-known aim points, easily destroyed with a handful of nuclear explosions.

In contrast, the relative advantage of the Minuteman ballistic missile force—beyond its low operating cost—is the 400 aim-points it presents any attacker. Destroying all those silos would elicit an intense U.S. response given the large scale devastation that would undoubtedly occur. Even if these attacks were conducted with low-yield weapons, the death, destruction, and fallout from so many atomic explosions would be considerable and long-lasting. Depending on the wind, Bozeman, Billings, or Bismarck could be at least rendered uninhabitable. An enemy would have to be reckless to presume that sort of bombardment could be conducted without an intense, and most likely immediate, response.

The problem, however, is symmetrical. Military planners must assume that even a single ballistic launch from a North American silo would be detected almost immediately by an enemy, and

could quite possibly compel a nuclear response even while the weapon was still in flight. Land-based ballistic missiles also cannot attack just any target. The Minutemen are awkwardly constrained in their target sets, as a shot towards China needs to fly over Russian Siberia possibly eliciting an unintended response.

In comparison, a successful penetration by an air-breathing bomber would detonate a nuclear bomb prior to detection. A strike could disrupt or even destroy the enemy's nuclear command-and-control network, and theoretically could decapitate the political leadership, without their ever knowing what had happened. Relatively small nuclear bunker-busters could destroy China's relatively small intercontinental missile force in its silos, with the fallout killing hundreds, not millions.

That said, Keir Lieber of Georgetown and Daryl Press of Dartmouth have argued that the U.S. Navy's Ohio-class submarines (and their eventual replacements) could achieve the same result. Both a decapitating strike and a blanketing of China's ballistic missile fields could be achieved from submarines silently moved forward into the western Pacific, firing Trident missiles on depressed-trajectory shots. The leadership in Beijing would have only a few minutes past detection in which to respond—very probably not enough before the weapons impacted. Moreover, eight Ohios are at sea at any time. The fleet thus generally comprises ten aim points, but only their bases at Bangor, Washington and King's Bay, Georgia are known for sure. The American submarines are very hard to find, and no enemy has the submarine fleet to find them all at once.

But full stop—what are we talking about? Signaling with nuclear-armed bombers may be an occasional course of action, but it's a bit buccaneering. Nuclear first strikes are far crazier. And all of this assumes that China will not eventually deploy large submarines with trans-Pacific missiles in the bastion that it is trying to make of the South China Sea, and that there aren't hundreds more intercontinental missiles hiding in caves. Perhaps building a potential first-strike bomber force may, as Eli Jacobs of the CSIS suggested, encourage the Chinese to spend lots more money digging this "Underground Great Wall."

But frankly, as Benjamin Friedman, Christopher Preble, and Matt Fay of the Cato Institute argued in *The End of Overkill: Reassessing US Nuclear Weapons Policy* (2013), "cases where the success of deterrence hinges on the US capability to destroy enemy nuclear forces are far-fetched." Their report recommended basing the entire nuclear force on submarines, as the United Kingdom does today, or perhaps retaining just the land-based missiles, as they're not that expensive.

Back in 2009, Dana Johnson, Christopher Bowie, and Robert Haffa of the Mitchell Institute had a similar set of arguments and policy prescriptions in their monograph *Triad, Dyad, or Monad? Shaping the US Nuclear Force for the Future*. As Rebecca Grant wrote in the forward, they suggested "nixing any research and development money for a new, nuclear-capable [air-launched cruise missile] and redirecting it toward a conventional-only bomber" [our emphasis]. If there is to be a big bomber, then perhaps nuclear capability is not a useful justification. More so, nuclear capability may actually be something one doesn't want in that bomber.

But then what kind of bomber does the U.S. need? An early opponent of this whole plan was "bomber-hating" General James Cartwright USMC. As Vice Chairman of the Joint Chiefs, and

previously as Commander of Strategic Command, Hoss influenced Defense Secretary Robert Gates to terminate the preceding Next Generation Bomber project in 2011. Back then, he told *Time* magazine that “nobody has showed many anything that’s required a person in that airplane—nobody.” Cartwright has even remarked that ballistic missiles are not manned either, and yet are trusted to deliver nuclear weapons. This begs the question of whether an air-breathing bomber—nuclear or not—could instead be a drone. We’ll tackle that question later.