NATO’s nuclear deterrence

Why a modernized US nuclear triad matters to NATO

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With the U.S. Air Force announcing on October 27, 2015 the selection of Northrop Grumman as the prime contractor for the long-range strike bomber (LRS-B), the United States’ follow on aircraft to the B-2 bomber, both critics of the U.S. Air Force and nuclear abolitionists have added the new bomber to their list of acquisition programs to challenge. The long-range standoff cruise missile (LRSO) has also faced heavy criticism in recent months as critics attempt to kill the program before it reaches the acquisition stage. For many Europeans, such sniping between competing political interests in the United States may be of little interest. However, both the LRS-B and the LRSO are expected to play an important role in the long term security of NATO member states. Thus, the debate has implications that go well beyond the United States’ borders.

Too often NATO member states think of the Alliance’s nuclear capability as the dual-capable fighters and B-61 gravity bombs flown by some members. They forget that Russia and other adversaries are not only deterred from striking the American homeland, but also nations protected by American extended deterrence because they fear the bomber, intercontinental ballistic missile, and submarine launched ballistic missile legs of the American nuclear triad. Dual-capable fighters are of great political utility within the alliance, but of limited strategic utility. Thus, remembering the significance to deterrence credibility of, in this case, the bomber leg of the triad is critical.

Do we need a LRS-B?

Writing in a variety of publications, critics argue that the LRS-B is too expensive and unnecessary for the types of conflicts the United States is likely to face. They also suggest that advancements in integrated air defense systems (IADS) make it less likely that even a stealthy bomber will be capable of penetrating defended air space to deliver conventional or nuclear weapons. At a minimum, critics of the program argue it should be a conventional only bomber, which they argue would save tens of millions of dollars.

Misunderstanding LRS-B

The problem with such arguments is that they underestimate the adaptability of a dual-capable bomber—able to carry conventional and nuclear weapons—in a variety of conventional conflicts and its utility in bolstering the credibility of American deterrence. In its conventional role the long-range strike bomber will not only have the ability to destroy targets anywhere on earth with pinpoint accuracy, but the aircraft will also serve as an advanced sensor suite that provides combatant commanders a great deal of real time intelligence, which they would not otherwise possess. Where the LRS-B can loiter over a small area, satellites are often limited in their time over target. Drones are limited in the sensor suites they carry. This leaves the LRS-B a key node in the intelligence network.
For those with little understanding of the importance of timely and integrated intelligence, this is a point worth emphasizing. Combatant commanders can never have too much intelligence as they attempt to accomplish a given mission in an environment that is characterized by fog and friction.

For those who criticized American airpower during the conflicts in Afghanistan and Iraq because of the civilian casualties that resulted from airstrikes, the LRS-B’s intelligence gathering and dissemination capabilities will play a role in further reducing such occurrences. Discrimination in targeting is particularly important in conventional operations.

Given the loiter time of bombers, the LRS-B’s ability to both collect intelligence and strike fleeting or mobile targets is of great value to the United States and cannot be replicated elsewhere. As Northrop Grumman will deliver a bomber that incorporates the latest advances in technology, there is little reason to doubt that the aircraft will achieve a similar or greater level of success to that of the B-2, which was also built by Northrop Grumman.

Even more important than its ability to perform a central role in conventional conflict is the long-range strike bomber’s nuclear role. With Russia determined to play a long-term balancing role against the United States and NATO, penetrating bombers will signal resolve and escalation. One recent example of using bombers to signal Russia of American resolve came in 2014 when the U.S. Air Force deployed B-52s to Royal Air Force Fairford in the United Kingdom—an old Strategic Air Command bomber base. As aircraft that can carry nuclear air launched cruise missiles, the United States was clearly and purposefully signaling President Putin in such a way as to encourage restraint. While unequivocally proving the success of this signaling effort is difficult, there is reason to believe it played a role in shaping Russia’s activities in Ukraine and, more importantly, toward NATO’s eastern members. For example, Russia has carefully avoided admitting that it is playing an overt combat role in the ongoing civil war. It has also been careful to avoid suggestions that Russia would intervene to protect “ethnic Russians” in Latvia, Lithuania, or Estonia.

The importance of signaling is also a major concern when it comes to deterring Iran over the long-term. Despite the rosy picture painted by proponents of the “nuclear deal” with Iran, the reality of the agreement is such that Iran will receive a total of $11.9 billion in previously frozen assets from the United States. Under the agreement, Iran is also free to continue development of its ballistic missile program, which will benefit from the financial windfall of returned assets and the removal of economic sanctions—a major hindrance to Iranian weapons programs. Thus, upon the expiration of the nuclear agreement with Iran, in ten years, the probability that the Iranian regime will have used the decade to focus on ballistic missile improvements is high.

To deter Iran, should the regime pursue nuclear weapons upon the agreement’s expiration, the LRS-B would play a central role in both signaling American resolve and conducting airstrikes against Iran in the 2020s and beyond. As a potential target of Iranian missiles, a nuclear capable LRS-B is central to the security of NATO member states.

One final point is worth noting. As a counter to American intercontinental and submarine launched ballistic missiles, Russia, Iran, China, and North Korea are developing road mobile ballistic missile forces that significantly complicate American targeting. Holding these
targets at risk may—depending upon a number of criteria—require the LRS-B and its ability to loiter and retarget—a capability ballistic missiles do not have. In short, America’s NATO allies should care deeply about the future of the Long-Range Strike Bomber because it will undoubtedly play a significant role in guaranteeing the security of Europe in future decades.

**Long-Range Standoff Cruise Missile**

One additional weapon’s system that has faced significant criticism in recent months is the long-range standoff cruise missile. In a *Washington Post* editorial by former US Secretary of Defense William Perry (1994-1997) and Assistant Secretary of Defense Andy Weber (2009-2014), the two men urge President Obama to kill the U.S. Air Force’s plan to develop and field the long-range standoff cruise missile (LRSO) as a replacement for the AGM-86 nuclear air launched cruise missile (ALCM). Perry and Weber are not alone in their criticism of the LRSO, but the arguments they offer are similar to those offered by other critics.

*Myth: the destabilizing effect of nuclear cruise missiles*

Perhaps the most significant argument offered by Perry and Weber suggests that cruise missiles are destabilizing weapons because a target country would not know whether incoming missiles are conventional or nuclear variants until after they strike their targets. They go on to suggest that the recent decision by the UK to forgo fielding sea-based nuclear cruise missiles was the result of coming to this same conclusion. The problem with the “destabilizing” argument is that the ultimate decision by Prime Minister David Cameron not to field nuclear cruise missiles was a financial decision.

For many readers of *Atlantisch Perspectief* who are familiar with the significant defense cuts that have come to Britain’s Ministry of Defense in recent years, the debate that took place concerning the affordability of the British nuclear arsenal was a bitter and highly politicized debate. To save the submarine-based deterrent, and field a new submarine, it was politically necessary to give up the cruise missile. Prime Minister Cameron did not make the decision to forgo a nuclear cruise missile because he believed it to be a destabilizing weapon. As for many European nations, the choice came down to a simple lack of cold hard cash. This challenge is one many NATO member states are facing themselves.

Additionally, Perry and Weber suggest that President Reagan supported banning nuclear ground launched cruise missiles (GLCM) in Europe because he reached the conclusion that they were destabilizing. This assertion does not match the historical record.

On October 13, 1981 the National Security Council met to discuss Secretary of Defense Casper Weinberger’s suggestion that the United States pursue a “zero option,” which would ban all intermediate range ballistic missiles and ground launched cruise missiles. President Reagan responded to this suggestion by asking, “Do we really want a zero-option for the battlefield? Don’t we need these nuclear systems? Wouldn’t it be bad for us to give them up since we need them to handle Soviet conventional superiority?”

In the years that followed, President Reagan never changed his fundamental view. He supported ratification of the Intermediate Nuclear Forces Treaty (1987) because the United States would trade 846 nuclear weapons (Pershing II and GLCM) for 1,846 Soviet nuclear weapons (SS-4, SS-5, SS-20). With the Soviets giving up better than two weapons to every
one American weapon the INF Treaty was a good deal for the United States. Given the United States’ technical superiority in intercontinental and submarine launched ballistic missiles, the INF Treaty added to American advantage while reducing Soviet weapons in Europe.

The simple fact is nuclear cruise missiles are no more destabilizing than a variety of other weapons in the American arsenal. It is also worth noting that as slow flying weapons, cruise missiles are not useful as first strike weapons. And because they can be dispersed across a number of different platforms, they are not an attractive first strike target.

Perhaps more destabilizing is the fact that the United States currently has the fewest types of nuclear weapons and delivery systems in half a century. Given the small size of the arsenal and the types of delivery systems, the United States is more susceptible to strategic surprise (e.g. development of game-changing technology) than it has been at any point since the development of nuclear weapons. Contrary to the assertions of nuclear minimalists and abolitionists, a small arsenal on few delivery platforms does not promote stability, but instead increases the chance that an adversary will take a risk and launch a first strike. Mutually assured destruction (MAD) worked because it left the United States and Soviet Union no room to think a first strike would be successful.

It may be of interest to readers to note that during the 1950s and 1960s the US Army’s nuclear force was greater in its variety of nuclear weapons and delivery systems than the United States’ current force. Yet, during that period, the Soviet-American nuclear standoff remained largely stable. Thus, Perry and Weber’s argument that a dual-use weapon—such as the cruise missile—is destabilizing because an adversary will not know which of the two variants (conventional or nuclear) is headed toward them, is simply incorrect. Russia and the United States have a long history of facing and fielding weapons that have a nuclear and conventional variant.

Perhaps it is worth pointing out, the Soviet and American arsenals were built to ensure a “secure second strike” specifically because there was an acknowledged level of uncertainty in the use of dual-capable weapons that would only become clear once they began to hit their targets and it was possible to determine whether they were conventional or nuclear. In short, both the Soviet Union (now Russia) and the United States have decades of experience with uncertainty, which means that incomplete information (conventional or nuclear cruise missile) does not create instability.

The Post Post-Cold War

Unfortunately, Perry and Weber—along with other critics of the nuclear arsenal—make a larger mistake; they fail to understand that the United States and Russia have entered into a Post Post-Cold War. The period of relative stability in the Russo-American relationship that followed the collapse of the Soviet Union is now over. Whether any of the naysayers like it or not, President Putin is seeking to reassert Russian influence internationally and especially in the Near-Abroad. As part of this increasingly bellicose Russian foreign policy nuclear weapons are more relevant today than they were a decade ago. Given Russia, China, and North Korea’s ongoing effort to develop and field advanced nuclear weapons and delivery systems, the United States would be negligent if it failed to develop the LRSO.
If, as Perry and Weber suggest, nuclear cruise missiles are a “Cold War relic” why is Russia fielding the new KH-102 nuclear cruise missile, which can strike the United States from launch points within Russian airspace? Neither Russia nor China seem to think nuclear cruise missiles are Cold War relics. Both countries understand that these weapons have the ability to defeat advanced integrated air defense systems (IADS) in ways that even the stealthy B-2 cannot.

**Why they matter**

Nuclear cruise missiles provide a number of advantages that critics overlook. First, the reality of employing cruise missiles is that they require far less logistical and planning support than bombers (including the LRS-B) and they can fly profiles that would be too dangerous for a bomber. This enables the United States to employ ALCMs in air defense environments that a penetrating bomber would find incredibly hazardous.

Second, LRSO will save the lives of American aircrews. They do this by penetrating enemy airspace that is impossible for the B-52 to penetrate and would put the B-2 and LRS-B at too great a risk. Not every bombing mission is equally dangerous. Should an ALCM be lost to enemy IADS, the loss is considerably less than if an American bomber were lost over enemy territory.

Third, bombers carrying ALCMs provide the president a level of flexibility that bombers carrying gravity bombs do not have. Where a bomber carrying the B-61 gravity bomb would likely strike a single or small number of targets (flying to numerous targets to drop individual weapons is improbable), that same bomber carrying the AGM-86 or the new LRSO would be capable of striking more than a dozen targets. And while some of the shortcomings described here may seem to counter the earlier argument for the LRS-B, no platform is the best solution for every situation. This is why both LRS-B and LRSO are important.

Lastly, Perry and Weber are incorrect to suggest that the B-2, and eventually LRS-B, can effectively serve as the air-based leg of the nuclear triad. The current fleet of B-2 bombers consists of sixteen operationally available aircraft, with a percentage of these aircraft available to fly missions at any given time. LRS-B is a decade or more into the future and may see cuts in actually numbers—much like the B-2—if costs rise. Given the B-2s small number, B-52 launched cruise missiles will play a central role in sustaining the credibility of American deterrence in both Europe and Asia.

**Conclusion**

With the United States facing the prospect of modernizing all three legs of the nuclear triad over the next twenty years, long-time advocates of cutting the nuclear force to minimal levels see an opportunity to make significant gains in the reduction of both nuclear warheads and delivery systems. If the United States were not the guarantor of extended deterrence to NATO member states, the discussion offered above would be interesting but irrelevant for many European readers. However, such is not the case. While the existence of American B-61 gravity bombs (nuclear weapons) on the sovereign soil of European states has proven politically difficult for some national governments, European NATO members
know that remaining a nuclear alliance not only guarantees a fighter force that can strike Russia, but includes the entire American nuclear triad.

American airpower in the form of bombers and nuclear air launched cruise missiles are central, although often overlooked, elements of NATO’s ultimate deterrent. This leaves little choice for Europe but to care about specific weapons programs in the United States. The reality of international politics is such that our adversaries do not see well intentioned attempts at disarmament by the United States or NATO for what they are. They see them as weakness and as former US Secretary of Defense Donald Rumsfeld once said, “Weakness is provocative.”

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