

Shaping Strategic Defense: The Air Force Nuclear Mission

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The Impetus

On the night of August 29th, 2007, Air Force loadmasters inadvertently loaded a B-52 bomber with six nuclear-tipped cruise missiles for its flight from Minot Air Force Base (AFB), North Dakota to Barksdale AFB, Louisiana.¹ Clambering to readjust its focus and regain the trust of the nation after the subsequent firestorm from this incident, the Air Force has placed renewed attention to its nuclear mission in the light of several mishaps that bring doubt upon the viability of its role in national defense. A sound strategic defense requires flexible and multi-functional platforms as well as the proper training and enforcement of standards currently left wanting in today's Air Force.

A Deterioration of Standards

In June 2008, the two most senior men in the United States Air Force stepped down from their posts, an unprecedented event that brings to light a trend of failures and deteriorating standards that has plagued the service branch for nearly two decades. Officials cited several failures to adhere to written standards throughout the complex chain between the Air Force's Air Combat Command, who were in charge of the B-52 and its crew, and the Air Mobility Command, who had supervision of the loadmasters. The weapons were Advanced Cruise Missiles, 1980s stealth weapons, flown for decommissioning to Barksdale AFB. Despite their inactive status, the fact remains that the crew had flown nuclear weapons over American air space, violating American and international nuclear arms agreements.²

Then, in March 2008, officials at Hill AFB, Utah, uncovered a shipment by the Defense Logistics Agency, dating back to September 2006, of four Mk-12 nose-cone fuse assemblies mistakenly shipped to Taiwan. The Taiwanese had expected four UH-1 replacement battery packs, but were surprised to find the nose-cones instead. The nose-cones were just one package

among 139 transfers since 2003 of excess classified parts from F.E. Warren AFB, Wyoming, to Hill AFB. Missile defense experts said the US may have violated nuclear nonproliferation agreements and U.S. export laws with the shipment of these classified nuclear components.³

Finally, in May 2008, unhappy with the Air Force's response to these incidents, Secretary of Defense Robert Gates took action, assigning a nuclear management task force headed by Admiral Kirkland H. Donald, the director of naval nuclear propulsion, to investigate the issue. Admiral Donald's report ultimately damned the senior leaders of the Air Force, concluding that the Minot-Barksdale and Taiwan incidents were symptomatic of a broader leadership and cultural problem in the Air Force.⁴ As a result, the Air Force Chief of Staff, General Michael Moseley, and Secretary, Michael Wynne, resigned from their posts on June 5, 2008.⁵

The mission had been effectively trivialized to the point where procedural checklists were haphazardly completed to get the planes off the ground and the packages delivered. In both the Minot-Barksdale and Taiwan incidents, standards set in place through years of discipline and experience from the Cold War era were ignored. Admiral Donald's study concluded that the massive restructuring of the Air Force after the end of the Cold War resulted in a piece-meal command structure that ungraciously linked vastly different sub-organizations and capability sets.

The Nuclear Responsibility

Admiral Donald's Nuclear Management Task Force revealed failures in leadership as far back as back 1990, during the post-Cold War reorganization of the Air Force. As a result, the Task Force's report states, "The downsizing of the nuclear enterprise, coupled with organizational changes in the Air Force and elsewhere in DoD, made the concerns of the nuclear forces less pressing....there was diminished appreciation of the merit and value of the deterrence

mission as emphasis shifted toward conventional warfighting.”⁶ Darryl Kimball, executive director of the Arms Control Association in Washington D.C., puts it more bluntly: “Nuclear weapons are out of style and they are not career enhancers if you have something to do with them in the military today.”⁷

This brings to question the importance of the nuclear deterrence mission now that the Cold War is over. As it stands, according to the Nuclear Task Force report on Reinvigorating the Air Force Nuclear Enterprise, “We face national and transnational adversaries whose motivations and responses are perhaps less predictable and have potential to do great harm to the United States or our allies.”⁸ Experts like Dr. Kimball argue that the gravest threat of nuclear proliferation is not from state actors. Rather, with the deteriorating standards prevalent in the Air Force, thousands of classified nuclear weapons components could essentially be unaccounted for and on the black market, granting terrorists, or non-state actors, entrance into the nuclear arms race.⁹

To this end, the much-publicized recent failures of nuclear surety inspections at Minot AFB, North Dakota and Malmstrom AFB, Montana¹⁰ may come as a ‘mixed blessing’. Senator Bill Nelson (D-FL) highlighted the fact that Minot AFB had passed all its previous inspections, revealing that “inspections don’t provide an accurate picture of the situation.”¹¹ With the toughening of standards for inspections come better performance and repairs for the lack of a “critical self-assessment culture.”¹² The importance of these efforts comes down to the very heart of the nuclear deterrence mission: terrorists will not hesitate to use nuclear weapons if they gain the capability.

The “Fighter-Centric” Mindset

With a demanding operational tempo, the Air Force cannot accomplish all it wishes in both conventional and strategic arms missions with its current resources. Leaders in the Air Force know it must bolster its nuclear deterrence capabilities, but it must do so while revitalizing its entire aging aircraft fleet. Until June, 2008, Air Force senior leadership emphasized the offensive air mission while downplaying the importance of nuclear deterrence. From the radical, and in some minds contrarian, changes enacted by then-Chief of Staff of the Air Force (CSAF) General Merrill McPeak in the early 1990s, the role of the fighter aircraft and strategic bomber has been promoted by senior leaders as the nation’s premiere military capability, while trivializing the importance of a major nuclear deterrence.¹³ This became known as the “fighter-centric” mindset, which pervaded the Air Force during this time, gained little clout during Operations Enduring Freedom and Iraqi Freedom¹⁴.

The Minot-Barksdale and Taiwan incidents further underscored the differing views of Air Force leadership among the joint community and the White House. Even now, Air Force senior leaders clamor for replacements for its dangerously aging fighter¹⁵ and tanker¹⁶ fleets, while proponents of the nuclear mission are vying for “training, education, and career force development”.¹⁷ All of these initiatives require money to accomplish their goals, but such competition for resources rehashes the fighter versus tanker debate, trapping the Air Force in a seemingly endless debate on resource management.

The appointment of General Norton Schwartz, a non-fighter pilot with extensive special operations experience,¹⁸ as the new CSAF brought a new perspective to this challenge. General Schwartz implemented a “back to basics” approach, with the aim of fostering high standards and responsibility for the nuclear mission. To accomplish this, the new CSAF pushed to

“Redesignate the inactivated Strategic Air Command...and activate as [Air Force Global Strike Command].”¹⁹ This new command rejoins the disparate organizations responsible for the recent failures and provides more clout to the nuclear mission, appointing a three-star general with nuclear mission experience who reports directly to the joint Strategic Command. Senior leadership has provided the impetus to leave the fighter-centric mindset and properly align itself with national strategy.

Strategic Defense

The nation faces an uncertain landscape with state and non-state actors that may have the ability to strike with nuclear capabilities. Should a terrorist group gain nuclear capability, they would have no fear of nuclear retaliation on home turf. The driving force of the nuclear mission, therefore, comes not from the capability to deliver, but to deter, and only plays a part in the nation’s overall strategic defense picture. Despite all the negative attention from the nuclear mission failures, the Air Force must not forget its other responsibilities. To accomplish its strategic mission, the Air Force must bring more flexible weapons platforms that can accomplish a wide range of missions.

For its part, the Air Force has focused on developing the ability to deliver strategic options such as long-range bombers and tankers to extend lethal and logistical capabilities. In fact, these two capabilities sit at the center of the debate: buy more bombers and fighters or more tankers? Bombers can carry nuclear munitions, but need tanker support to cover longer distances. While bombers can only deliver weapons, tankers can extend supply and other support missions. Relegating the Air Force to a tanker-specific, or enabler role, on the other hand, only invites other countries with comparable fighter capabilities to test US air superiority in future conflicts.

Even if the Air Force can field the right mix of warfighting platforms, the Nuclear Task Force report highlighted failures of personnel and training that had nothing to do with equipment. Sometimes it takes the threat of a major conflict to understand the importance of any mission, along with proper training and enforcement of standards. General Schwartz's "back to basics" campaign partially resurrects this mindset. However, such action also requires the divestment of more resources. Important questions of which platform to choose, how many to buy, and how to train on it, confront today's Air Force leaders, especially within the fledgling Global Strike Command. No simple answer exists for such a complex set of issues, but focusing too much on one aspect, whether to source more fighters, bombers, nukes, or tankers, only results in a stagnating the force once again. While the resurgent emphasis on the nuclear deterrence mission will compel the Air Force to shed its "fighter-centric" mindset, the service must still reestablish its strategic national defense role through proficient acquisitions and training.

Conclusion

As General Schwartz stated at the beginning of his endeavor as CSAF, "[The nuclear mission] is a mission where anything less than perfection is not acceptable....the bottom line is we lost focus, and that focus is coming back."²⁰ Senior attention is now keyed in on the Air Force's leading role in nuclear deterrence for the nation. While nuclear threats persist, however, so do other conventional threats, which forces the Air Force and the military as a whole to continually juggle its priorities. Meanwhile, the Air Force's resurgent nuclear deterrence capability, departure from the "fighter-centric" mindset, and emergence as the nation's premier strategic defense provider will strengthen the Air Force for today and posture it for future conflicts as they arise.

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