Critical Need for Advanced Manned Penetrating Bomber

During World War II, this Nation witnessed the value of long-range bombers as they offered a means to achieve critical operational objectives while placing fewer American and Allied lives at risk. Still, we suffered far too many losses during this war, and when it was over and we faced yet another threat from the Soviet Union, our leaders vowed to find an alternative to another war of attrition. That alternative was called containment, and this strategy was underpinned by our ability to reach targets across the Soviet Union and its satellites with long-range bombers.

With the fall of the Soviet Union, many thought that we no longer needed bombers, but subsequent conflicts again demonstrated the value of their range, payload, and persistence. The long-range precision strike capabilities of today's bomber force are vastly different from the "carpet bombing" employed in Vietnam. The first strikes in Desert Storm were launched from B-52s flown from Barksdale Air Force Base in Louisiana. B-52s and B-2s were again called upon during Kosovo, now carrying new weapons that could be released with great accuracy from high altitude, and able to strike targets in all weather conditions. After 9-11, the range, payload, and persistence of the bomber force enabled the Northern Alliance to defeat a much larger and better equipped Taliban force. In Iraq, bombers integrated with airborne ISR and SOF to ensure Saddam Hussein could not launch SCUD missiles on Israel, and with the help of Kurdish militia forces, protected the northern oil fields from the Republican Guard. Today, B-1s provide persistent coverage over both Iraq and Afghanistan, while B-52s and B-2s conduct regional shaping and deterrence operations in the Pacific from Guam. And, aided by the electro-optical capabilities of their advanced targeting pods, B-52s have demonstrated valuable capabilities to conduct maritime surveillance and interdiction operations in support homeland defense.

These workhorses are aging and in need of modernization. Some suggest that since the B-1 and B-52 are not scheduled to “age out” until 2040, we can defer research and development on a replacement at this time. The fact is that because of their unique capabilities and value, we are flying these airplanes at a much higher rate than anticipated which is likely to reduce their operational life significantly. The relatively small size of the fleet must absorb this operational load; the situation would have been worse had Congress not intervened to protect these marvelous airplanes from premature retirement. This also suggests that the replacement fleet must be comparably sized, preferably larger, and certainly not a small “silver bullet” force.

As you consider the evolutionary employment of these systems, one point is clear: their enduring success is the result of their inherent flexibility and adaptability. This is a major reason why the replacement bomber must be both manned and stealthy. Operations today in Iraq and Afghanistan may be lulling us into a false sense of security, particularly with regard to remotely piloted aircraft operations. Both the airspace and cyberspace in which these unmanned platforms operate are uncontested, which enables their use; however, an able future adversary is likely to threaten them using air attack, surface-to-air missiles and electronic warfare. This will make unmanned operations almost impossible, and without stealth, manned operations will be limited to standoff weapons, taking away the persistence and payload benefits the bomber provides.
Given the tremendous contribution of manned bombers from World War II through today, it is surprising that there is not universal support for continued modernization of this important capability. The United States is a global power, and the long-range bomber is foundational to our global military might. These long-range, persistent strike platforms are unique in their ability to support tactical operations on the ground, provide operational alternatives that reduce risk to American lives, and offer strategic alternatives to enable other instruments of national power to be effective and perhaps achieve our objectives without the need for attrition warfare. They also serve as a hedge against a catastrophic degradation in our ballistic missile capability, are the basis for extended deterrence which assures our allies that they do not need to develop nuclear weapons of their own, and provide a visible demonstration of American will and capability to deescalate crises around the globe.

In short, the Nation needs a viable, modern long-range persistent strike force today and in the future. To ensure this future force, we must begin development of the manned, penetrating bomber now.

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