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The Nuclearization of American Diplomacy



On August 21st, six nuclear-capable B-52H Stratofortress bombers, representing approximately one-seventh of the war-ready U.S. B-52H bomber fleet, flew from their home base in North Dakota to Fairford Air Base in England for several weeks of intensive operations over Europe. Although the actual weapons load of those giant bombers was kept secret, each of them is capable of carrying eight AGM-86B nuclear-armed, air-launched cruise missiles (ALCMs) in its bomb bay. Those six planes, in other words, could have been carrying 48 city-busting thermonuclear warheads. (The B-52H can also carry 12 ALCMs on external pylons, but none were visible on this occasion.) With such a load alone, in other

words, those six planes possessed the capacity to incinerate much of western Russia, including Moscow and St. Petersburg.

The B-52 Stratofortress is no ordinary warplane. First flown in 1952, it was designed with a single purpose in mind: to cross the Atlantic or Pacific Ocean and drop dozens of nuclear bombs on the Soviet Union. Some models were later modified to deliver tons of conventional bombs on targets in North Vietnam and other hostile states, but the remaining B-52s are still largely configured for intercontinental nuclear strikes. With only 44 of them now thought to be in active service at any time, those six dispatched to the edge of Russian territory represented a significant commitment of American nuclear war-making capability.

What in god's name were they doing there? According to American officials, they were intended to demonstrate this country's ability to project overwhelming power anywhere on the planet at any time and so remind our NATO allies of Washington's commitment to their defense. "Our ability to quickly respond and assure allies and partners rests upon the fact that we are able to deploy our B-52s at a moment's notice," commented General Jeff Harrigan, commander of U.S. Air Forces in Europe. "Their presence here helps build trust with our NATO allies... and affords us new opportunities to train together through a variety of scenarios."

While Harrigan didn't spell out just what scenarios he had in mind, the bombers' European operations suggest that their role involved brandishing a nuclear "stick" in support of an increasingly hostile stance toward Russia. During their sojourn in Europe, for example, two of them flew over the Baltic Sea close to Kaliningrad, a Russian enclave sandwiched between Poland and Lithuania that houses several key military installations. That September 25th foray coincided with a U.S. troop buildup in Lithuania about 65 miles from election-embattled Belarus, a Russian neighbor.

Since August 9th, when strongman Alexander Lukashenko declared victory in a presidential election widely considered fraudulent by his people and much of the international community, Belarus has experienced recurring anti-government protests. Russian President Vladimir Putin has warned that his country might intervene there if the situation "gets out of control," while Secretary of State Mike Pompeo has implicitly warned of U.S. intervention if Russia interferes. "We stand by our long-term commitment to support Belarus' sovereignty and territorial integrity as well as the aspiration of the Belarusian people to choose their leader and to choose their own path, free from external intervention," he insisted on August 20th. The flight of those B-52s near Belarus can, then, be reasonably interpreted as adding a nuclear dimension to Pompeo's threat.

In another bomber deployment with no less worrisome implications, on September 4th, three B-52s, accompanied by Ukrainian fighter planes, flew over the Black Sea near the coast of Russian-held Crimea. Like other B-52 sorties near its airspace, that foray prompted the rapid

scrambling of Russian interceptor aircraft, which [often fly](#) threateningly close to American planes.

At a moment when tensions were [mounting](#) between the U.S.-backed Ukrainian government and Russian-backed rebel areas in the eastern part of the country, the deployment of those bombers off Crimea was widely viewed as yet another nuclear-tinged threat to Moscow. As Hans Kristensen, director of the Nuclear Information Project at the Federation of American Scientists (FAS), [tweeted](#), “Extraordinary decision to send a nuclear bomber so close to contested and tense areas. This is a real in-your-face statement.”

And provocative as they were, those were hardly the only forays by U.S. nuclear bombers in recent months. B-52s also ventured near Russian air space in the Arctic and within range of Russian forces in Syria. Meanwhile other B-52s, as well as nuclear-capable B-1 and B-2 bombers, have flown similar missions near Chinese positions in the South China Sea and the waters around the disputed island of Taiwan. Never since the Cold War ended with the collapse of the Soviet Union in 1991 have so many U.S. nuclear bombers been engaged in “show-of-force” operations of this sort.

“Demonstrating Resolve” and Coercing Adversaries

States have long engaged in military operations to intimidate other powers. Once upon a distant time, this would have been called “gunboat diplomacy” and naval vessels would have been the instruments of choice for such missions. The arrival of nuclear arms made such operations far more dangerous. This didn’t, however, stop the U.S. from [using](#) weaponry of this sort as tools of intimidation throughout the Cold War. In time, however, even nuclear strategists began condemning acts of “nuclear coercion,” arguing that such weaponry was inappropriate for any purpose other than “deterrence” — that is, using the threat of “massive retaliation” to prevent another country from attacking you. In fact, a deterrence-only posture eventually became Washington’s official policy, even if the temptation to employ nukes as political cudgels [never entirely disappeared](#) from its strategic thinking.

At a more hopeful time, President Barack Obama sought to downsize this country’s nuclear arsenal and prevent the use of such weapons for anything beyond deterrence (although his administration also commenced an [expensive “modernization”](#) of that arsenal). In his widely applauded Nobel Peace Prize speech of April 5, 2009, Obama [swore](#) to “put an end to Cold War thinking” and “reduce the role of nuclear weapons in our national security strategy.” Unfortunately, Donald Trump has sought to move the dial in the opposite direction, including increasing the use of nukes as coercive instruments.

The president’s deep desire to bolster the role of nuclear weapons in national security was first spelled out in his administration’s [Nuclear Posture Review](#) of February 2018. In addition to calling for the accelerated modernization of the nuclear arsenal, it also endorsed the use of such weapons to demonstrate American “resolve” — in other words, a willingness to go to the nuclear brink over political differences. A large and diverse arsenal was desirable, the

document noted, to “demonstrate resolve through the positioning of forces, messaging, and flexible response options.” Nuclear bombers were said to be especially useful for such a purpose: “Flights abroad,” it stated, “display U.S. capabilities and resolve, providing effective signaling for deterrence and assurance, including in times of tension.”

Ever since, the Trump administration has been deploying the country’s nuclear bomber fleet of B-52s, B-1s, and B-2s with increasing frequency to “display U.S. capabilities and resolve,” particularly with respect to Russia and China.

The supersonic [B-1B Lancer](#), developed in the 1970s, was originally meant to replace the B-52 as the nation’s premier long-range nuclear bomber. After the Cold War ended, however, it was converted to carry conventional munitions and is no longer officially designated as a nuclear delivery system — though it could be reconfigured for this purpose at any time. The [B-2 Spirit](#), with its distinctive flying-wing design, was the first U.S. bomber built with “stealth” capabilities (meant to avoid detection by enemy radar systems) and is configured to carry both nuclear and conventional weaponry. For the past year or so, those two planes plus the long-lived B-52 have been used on an almost weekly basis as the radioactive “stick” of U.S. diplomacy around the world.

Nuclear Forays in the Arctic and the Russian Far East

When flying to Europe in August, those six B-52s from North Dakota’s Minot Air Force Base took a [roundabout route](#) north of Greenland (which President Trump had [unsuccessfully offered](#) to purchase in 2019). They finally descended over the Barents Sea within easy missile-firing range of Russia’s [vast naval complex](#) at Murmansk, the home for most of its ballistic missile submarines. For Hans Kristensen of FAS, that was [another](#) obvious and “pointed message at Russia.”

Strategically speaking, Washington had largely ignored the Arctic until a combination of factors — global warming, accelerated oil and gas drilling in the region, and increased Russian and Chinese military activities there — sparked growing interest. As global temperatures have risen, the Arctic ice cap has been melting at an ever-faster pace, allowing energy firms to exploit the region’s [extensive hydrocarbon resources](#). This, in turn, has led to [feverish efforts](#) by the region’s littoral states, led by Russia, to lay claim to such resources and build up their military capabilities there.

In light of these developments, the Trump administration, led by Secretary of State Mike Pompeo, has [called for](#) an expansion of this country’s Arctic military forces. In a speech delivered at the Arctic Council in Rovaniemi, Finland, in May 2019, Pompeo warned of Russia’s growing military stance in the region and pledged a strong American response to it. “Under President Trump,” he [declared](#). “We are fortifying America’s security and diplomatic presence in the area.”

In line with this, the Pentagon has deployed U.S. warships to the Arctic on a regular basis, while engaging in ever more elaborate military exercises there. These have included [Cold](#)

[Response 2020](#), conducted this spring in Norway's far north within a few hundred miles of those key Russian bases at Murmansk. For the most part, however, the administration has relied on nuclear-bomber forays to demonstrate its opposition to an increasing Russian role there. In November 2019, for example, three B-52s, accompanied by Norwegian F-16 fighter jets, [approached](#) the Russian naval complex at Murmansk, a move meant to demonstrate the Pentagon's capacity to launch nuclear-armed missiles at one of that country's most critical military installations.

If the majority of such nuclear forays have occurred near Norway's far north, the Pentagon has not neglected Russia's far eastern territory, home of its Pacific Fleet, either. In an unusually brazen maneuver, this May a B-1B bomber [flew over](#) the Sea of Okhotsk, an offshoot of the Pacific Ocean surrounded by Russian territory on three sides (Siberia to the north, Sakhalin Island to the west, and the Kamchatka Peninsula to the east).

As if to add insult to injury, the Air Force dispatched two B-52H bombers over the Sea of Okhotsk in June — another first for an aircraft of that type. Needless to say, incursions in such a militarily sensitive area led to the [rapid scrambling](#) of Russian fighter aircraft.

The South China Sea and Taiwan

A similar, equally provocative pattern can be observed in the East and South China Seas. Even as President Trump has sought, largely unsuccessfully, to negotiate a trade deal with Beijing, his administration has become increasingly antagonistic towards the Chinese leadership. On July 23rd, Secretary of State Pompeo delivered a particularly hostile [speech](#) in the presidential library of Richard Nixon, the very commander-in-chief who first reopened relations with communist China. Pompeo called on American allies to suspend normal relations with Beijing and, like Washington, treat it as a hostile power, much the way the Soviet Union was viewed during the Cold War.

While administration rhetoric amped up, the Department of Defense has been bolstering its capacity to engage and defeat Beijing in any future conflict. In its 2018 [National Defense Strategy](#), as the U.S. military's "forever wars" dragged on, the Pentagon suddenly labeled China and Russia the two greatest threats to American security. More recently, it singled out China alone as the overarching menace to American national security. "In this era of great-power competition," Secretary of Defense Mark Esper [declared](#) this September, "the Department of Defense has prioritized China, then Russia, as our top strategic competitors."

The Pentagon's efforts have largely been focused on the South China Sea, where China has established a network of small military installations on artificial islands created by dredging sand from the sea-bottom near some of the reefs and atolls it claims. American leaders have never accepted the legitimacy of this island-building project and have repeatedly called upon Beijing to dismantle the bases. Such efforts have, however, largely fallen on deaf ears and it's now evident that the Pentagon is considering military means to eliminate the island threat.

In early July, the U.S. Navy conducted its most elaborate maneuvers to date in those waters, [deploying](#) two aircraft carriers there — the USS *Nimitz* and the USS *Ronald Reagan* — plus an escort fleet of cruisers, destroyers, and submarines. While there, the two carriers launched hundreds of combat planes in simulated attacks on military bases on the islands the Chinese had essentially built.

At the same time, paratroopers from the Army's 25th Infantry Division were [flown](#) from their home base in Alaska to the Pacific island of Guam in what was clearly meant as a simulated air assault on a (presumably Chinese) military installation. And just to make sure the leadership in Beijing understood that, in any actual encounter with U.S. forces, Chinese resistance would be countered by the maximum level of force deemed necessary, the Pentagon [also flew](#) a B-52 bomber over those carriers as they engaged in their provocative maneuvers.

And that was hardly the first visit of a nuclear bomber to the South China Sea. The Pentagon has, in fact, been deploying such planes there on a regular basis since the beginning of 2020. In April, for example, the Air Force [dispatched](#) two B-1B Lancers on a 32-hour round-trip from their home at Ellsworth Air Force Base, North Dakota, to that sea and back as a demonstration of its ability to project power even in the midst of the pandemic President Trump likes to [call](#) “the Chinese plague.”

Meanwhile, tensions have grown over the status of the island of Taiwan, which China views as a breakaway part of the country. Beijing has been pressuring its leaders to foreswear any moves toward independence, while the Trump administration tacitly endorses just such a future by doing the previously unimaginable — notably, by [sending](#) high-level officials, Secretary of Health and Human Services Alex Azar among them, on visits to the island and by promising deliveries of increasingly sophisticated weapons. Meanwhile, the Pentagon has upped its military presence in that part of the Pacific, too. The Navy has repeatedly [dispatched](#) missile-armed destroyers on “freedom of navigation” missions through the Taiwan Strait, while other U.S. warships have conducted elaborate military exercises in nearby waters.

Needless to say, such provocative steps have alarmed Beijing, which has responded by [increasing](#) the incursions of its military aircraft into airspace claimed by Taiwan. To make sure that Beijing fully appreciates the depth of American “resolve” to resist any attempt to seize Taiwan by force, the Pentagon has accompanied its other military moves around the island with — you guessed it — [flights](#) of B-52 bombers.

Playing with Fire

And where will all this end? As the U.S. sends nuclear-capable bombers on increasingly provocative flights ever closer to Russian and Chinese territory, the danger of an accident or mishap is bound to grow. Sooner or later, a fighter plane from one of those countries is going to get too close to an American bomber and a deadly incident will occur. And what will

happen if a nuclear bomber, armed with advanced missiles and electronics (even conceivably nuclear weapons), is in some fashion downed? Count on one thing: in Donald Trump's America the calls for devastating retaliation will be intense and a major conflagration cannot be ruled out.

Bluntly put, dispatching nuclear-capable B-52s on simulated bombing runs against Chinese and Russian military installations is simply nuts. Yes, it must scare the bejesus out of Chinese and Russian officials, but it will also prompt them to distrust any future peaceful overtures from American diplomats while further bolstering their own military power and defenses. Eventually, we will all find ourselves in an ever more dangerous and insecure world with the risk of Armageddon lurking just around the corner.

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