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Nuclear Certification for a New Bomber

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The Obama Administration's 2010 Nuclear Posture Review says that bombers are central to extended deterrence. But at the same time, the Obama Administration is willing to let the capability of the bomber force decline for the next several decades. This makes no sense.

Unnecessary Delays in Nuclear Certification.

On November 2, Air Force Chief of Staff General Norton Schwartz testified before the House Armed Services Committee on the consequences of defense sequestration. He stated that the Air Force's new long-range bomber will initially be capable of carrying only conventional weapons. There are good reasons, however, to certify bombers to be nuclear-capable at the beginning of their service lives.

One goal of the Air Force is to build new planes as quickly and cheaply as possible. One of the implications of this goal is that new bombers would be built nuclear-capable but would not be certified for a nuclear mission until later—in concurrence with the end of the B-2 and B-52 bombers' service lives. According to General Schwartz, the certification process would be quite elaborate and would involve electromagnetic pulse hardening and other intense testing.¹

Advanced Capability Necessary in the Years Ahead. The new bomber should be ready before the current fleet—comprised of the B-52 bomber and the B-2 bomber—goes out of service. The more compelling reason for a new bomber, though, is

that the B-52s are no longer capable of operating against advanced enemy air defenses.² As potential U.S. enemies develop new more advanced capabilities, the technological advantage that the U.S. possesses will be narrower and narrower. This would also negatively impact the B-2's ability to operate in an enemy environment in the future. Both Russia and China are now deploying advanced defenses that require enhanced U.S. capabilities, particularly 15–20 years from now, when the new bomber would become operational.

It would be possible for the United States to send a “strike package” (e.g., bombers accompanied by jet fighters) to help penetrate these defenses, but bombers must have the capability to operate in an enemy environment alone in some types of nuclear missions, particularly with regard to the central nuclear deterrence mission involving Russia and China. In February 2011, Air Force Vice Chief of Staff General Phillip Breedlove stated that the new bomber will be based on “proven technologies.” This might not be enough as other states invest in advanced defenses.

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Prospects for Savings Are Real. According to the Air Force, the new bomber should be deployed in the 2020 timeframe. Considering that the B-52 fleet is scheduled to remain operational until 2044 and the B-2 until 2058, new bombers might already be more than 15 years old when undergoing nuclear certification under the current Air Force proposal. Certifying the bomber when it initially becomes operational will only marginally increase development costs and substantially enhance deterrence capability.

It is possible that it will be less expensive to certify bombers for a nuclear mission right from the beginning than to potentially alter discovered design flaws—for example, vulnerability to nuclear effects—when they are operationally deployed and retrofit the entire fleet.

Staying Ahead of the Game. Bombers have a unique ability to signal the political leadership's will to resolve a military conflict. As such, they provide a significant value and compliment the other three legs of the nuclear triad. As more than 30 countries all over the world rely on the U.S. nuclear guarantees, it is essential that the United States possess the best possible capability for decades ahead.

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1. Philip Ewing, "CSAF Details Bomber Phase-In Plan," DoD Buzz, November 2, 2011, at <http://www.dodbuzz.com/2011/11/02/csaf-details-bomber-phase-in-plan/> (November 4, 2011).
2. Bill Sweetman, "Behind the New Bomber," *Aviation Week*, January 18, 2011, at <http://www.aviationweek.com/aw/blogs/defense/index.jsp?plckController=Blog&plckBlogPage=BlogViewPost&newspaperUserId=27ec4a53-dcc8-42d0-bd3a-01329aef79a7&plckPostId=Blog%3a27ec4a53-dcc8-42d0-bd3a-01329aef79a7Post%3a140889f2-164d-4d81-bc57-90f6b2c5dac7&plck> (November 4, 2011).