



B-1B Lancer Nuclear Rerole Plan

Recommended Citation

"B-1B Lancer Nuclear Rerole Plan", Nuclear Strategy, December 31, 2001,
<https://nautilus.org/projects/nuclear-strategy/b-1b-lancer-nuclear-rerole-plan-2/>

Referenced in:

"[The Unruly Hedge](#):
Cold War Thinking at the Crawford Summit"
[Arms Control Today](#)
December 2001.

Although the B-1B is widely described by military officials as a "conventional-only" bomber, the Pentagon maintains a "[nuclear rerole plan](#)" under which "spare" nuclear bombs for the aircraft are maintained in the Active Reserve Stockpile of U.S. Strategic Command (STRATCOM) to quickly return the bombers to nuclear strike missions if necessary.

The B-1 bombers' SIOP commitment ended on October 1, 1997, coinciding with former president Bill Clinton signing Presidential Decision Directive 60 (PDD-60) and the SIOP-98 entering into effect.

The B-1 Nuclear Rerole Plan dates back to September 1992, shortly before the signing of START II, when the Air Force decided to upgrade the conventional capability of the B-1. Air Combat Command (ACC) and STRATCOM were tasked to ensure that the conventional upgrades "would neither preclude future nuclear capabilities (if necessary) nor demand the high cost to maintain an immediate nuclear capability." When the Nuclear Posture Review (NPR) was announced in September 1994, then Deputy Secretary of Defense John Deutch assured the Senate Armed Services Committee that, "we would have no nuclear capability maintained for the B-1 bomber." In truth, however, the Nuclear Posture Review decided that, "reorientation [of the B-1 to a conventional aircraft] will not preclude the return of the B-1 fleet to a strategic nuclear role." The plan was formally enshrined into the FY 1999-2002 Defense Planning Guidance by Secretary of Defense William Cohen in 1998.

Portraying the B-1 as conventional-only was important to relieve the aircraft of its burdensome image as a nuclear relic of the Cold War. The expensive B-2 program had already been cut to only 21 aircraft, so shifting the B-1 to conventional missions increased its utility in real-world operations. Behind the scene, however, ACC and STRATCOM were tasked by the Air Force to ensure that the conventional upgrades "would neither preclude future nuclear capabilities (if necessary) nor demand the high cost to maintain an immediate nuclear capability." So when the B-1 was officially relieved of its SIOP commitment in 1997, the aircraft maintenance procedures did not change, and the nuclear hardness and surety of has been maintained ever since. In fact, one of the assumptions of the Nuclear Rerole Plan is that the B-1's nuclear mission "will take priority" over its conventional mission.

Although a one-time rerole of a nuclear bomber to its former nuclear mission is legally permitted under the START II treaty, maintaining this capability undercuts the important U.S. national security goal of ensuring that the nuclear disarmament process is transparent and irreversible. Each reroled B-1 bomber would be credited with 16 nuclear bombs each, or nearly 1,000 bombs for a fleet of 63 aircraft.

Beyond saving the B-1 from the budget ax, the upgrade accomplished several things. First, the conventional-only status meant that the aircraft would not be counted under START II, in contrast with START I. This allowed the U.S. to reduce the number of accountable bomber weapons so as to make room for the more valuable nuclear air launched cruise missiles (ALCM). Second, it saved money. Maintaining full nuclear capability is an inherently expensive and cumbersome process that places a significant extra burden on crew and equipment needed for conventional missions. So strained were ACC's resources in the 1990s, that it occasionally was forced to ask to be relieved from participating in STRATCOM's nuclear exercises.

The B-1 Nuclear Rerole Plan also implemented the so-called hedge-strategy, a central nuclear planning principle of the 1990s, by removing a nuclear platform from operational status while retaining a quick reconstitution (upload) capability. To nuclear planners, maintaining a hedge was a prudent response to what they saw as the enemy: uncertainty. Instead of being eliminated, thousands of nuclear warheads removed from missiles, bombers, and submarines were placed in inactive storage. If Russia returned to a more hostile regime, or one of the legs of the nuclear Triad failed, thousands of these warheads could quickly be retrieved from the inactive reserve and reloaded onto existing delivery platforms to boost the arsenal. The hedge legitimized a huge nuclear shadow arsenal outside arms control agreements.

Although the B-1 Nuclear Rerole Plan is dated October 1998, ACC confirmed the plan as current on November 2, 2001.

FOIA documents

["B-1 Nuclear Rerole Plan"](#)

(PDF; 1.79 MB)

["Trip Report -- USSTRATCOM/J5 B-1B Nuclear Rerole Discussions,"](#)

ACC Memorandum, 24 Apr 1998

(PDF; 0.32 MB)

["HQ ACC B-1 Nuclear Rerole Plan,"](#)

ACC Staff Summary Sheet,

30 Oct 1998

(PDF; 0.33 MB)

[ACC Plan Confirmation,](#)

20 Feb 2001

(PDF; 0.09 MB)

New: As of Nov 2, according to the Air Force, the plan was unchanged.

[Reports and articles](#)

View this online at: <https://nautilus.org/projects/nuclear-strategy/b-1b-lancer-nuclear-rerole-plan-2/>

Nautilus Institute

608 San Miguel Ave., Berkeley, CA 94707-1535 | Phone: (510) 423-0372 | Email:

nautilus@nautilus.org