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The Pentagon Is Building the "Arsenal Plane," a Giant Flying Battlewagon

The Arsenal Plane will carry a tremendous punch a long, long way

By Kyle Mizokami

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U.S. Secretary of Defense Ash Carter has revealed the existence of a program to develop a so-called "Arsenal Plane." Designed to back up fifth generation fighters such as the F-35 with a large number of conventional weapons, backing up the high-tech fighters with tried-and-true ordinance.

The Arsenal Plane actually has its roots at sea. During the 1990s, there was an effort to create so-called "Arsenal Ships"—large boats packed with hundreds of missile silos that would rely on the targeting data of the rest of the fleet. The Arsenal Ship was never built, but four Ohio-class submarines were converted to carry 154 Tomahawk cruise missiles each, platforms now recognized as extremely important in providing stand-off, precision firepower.

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The Arsenal Plane takes this same concept and puts it in the air. An ideal Arsenal Plane would be a large platform with long range and mid-air refueling capability. The plane would need to be equipped with Link 16, a digital datalink system used by the U.S. military and allied ships, planes and ground forces to communicate with one another and share information.

But most importantly, the Arsenal Plane needs to be, well, a flying arsenal. Lumbering, non-stealthy and slow, the Arsenal Plane would carry long-range standoff missiles such as the Joint Air to Surface Standoff Missile (JASSM) during missions against enemies with modern air defenses, or precision-guided bombs in theaters such as Afghanistan or Iraq where the enemy's air defenses are limited or non-existent.

The new plane would supplement the F-35 in places where the fighter-bomber is weak, particularly in weapons carrying capability. The F-35 can only carry a handful of weapons internally—anything carried on the outside of the aircraft makes it more visible to radar. To make matters worse, that internal storage must be shared between air-to-air and air-to-ground weapons.

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In one possible scenario, a pair of Joint Strike Fighters could fly towards a heavily defended enemy ground target armed only with air-to-air missiles for self protection. Several hundred miles behind them an Arsenal Plane—relying on intelligence gleaned by satellites or unmanned vehicles—could launch a pre-planned strike against enemy air defenses. Stealthy and with a range of more than 200 miles, JASSM can be launched from beyond the reach of enemy air defenses, ensuring the Arsenal Plane's safety. Meanwhile, the stealthy F-35s creep closer to the target. After the first round of missile strikes, the F-35s then use their Electro-Optical Targeting System (EOTS) to assess damage to enemy defenses. They could then ask for another round of follow-up strikes on surviving defenses, or request the Arsenal Plane to unleash a barrage on the target itself.

One thing we don't know about the Arsenal Plane is what aircraft the Pentagon has in mind. The Secretary of Defense only alluded to "one of our oldest aircraft platforms." This could refer to the B-52 bomber, which has long range, a midair refueling capability, an internal capability to carry eight JASSMs, and underwing pylons that could carry up to a dozen others. The Arsenal Plane could also be converted older versions of the C-130 Hercules.

Above all, the Arsenal Plane must be affordable, and this suggests taking an existing platform such as the B-52 and performing simple upgrades. The Pentagon has a lot of planes to buy and not a lot of money. The Arsenal Plane is coming at a time when the Air Force is planning to purchase the F-35, KC-46 Pegasus airborne tanker, Long-Range Strike Bomber, and T-X jet trainer. But its presence in the air could conceivably help them all.