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US Pivot to Asia Poised to Enter Nuclear Phase

By Peter Lee
April 27, 2016

I'm expecting tactical nuclear weapons to reappear overtly in the US military equation for Asia...

...but only after the US Navy gets its chance to feast at the pivot trough for its long-for but perhaps strategically less-than-vital conventional forces buildout in Asia.

I have an article up exclusively on Asia Times, The Case of the Missing Nukes...and a Disappearing US Mission in Asia, concerning an interesting and, I fear, transitory lack of tactical nuclear weapons in theater in Asia.

US land based tactical nukes for the army and air force were pulled out of Asia at the end of the Cold War and it would require major political and diplomatic handwringing to put them back. The US Navy got out of the tactical nuke business for surface vessels worldwide at the same time. The Pentagon then stripped the Navy of its submarine tactical nuke, the nuclear-tipped Tomahawk cruise missile, the TLAM-N, formally and irrevocably retiring it in 2013 over the objections of Japan and a certain, Tomahawk-lovin' segment of the US defense industry.

The US rejection of tactical nuclear weapons in Asia, however, is a matter of situational analysis, not principle or service scruples. The US maintains a reported stash of 200 air-delivered tactical nuclear weapons with its NATO allies in Europe because otherwise NATO would consider itself

at a fatal disadvantage against the larger Russian forces, which also have tactical nuclear weapons.

The key issue, as I write at AT:

The United States denuded its local posture in Asia for a variety of righteous and practical reasons but the bottom line was that the US believed it could kick China's behind with conventional forces, particularly the high-tech, high-precision weaponry it developed in its "Revolution in Military Affairs" starting in the 1990s. Accurate bombs & missiles and stealthy aircraft could deliver the same devastating punch against PLA military assets as crude nuclear attacks without the literal and figurative fallout.

Well...

Well, the job of deterring/containing/defeating the PRC using conventional means gets bigger and harder every day!

Cue that brawny bad boy, AirSea Battle, for a region-wide full spectrum conventional military confrontation with the PRC!

Well, cue JAM-GC instead, for a couple reasons. First off, AirSea Battle had a fatal flaw: it lacked the indispensable word "Land" and thereby invited the jealousy and opposition of the US Army. Second, ix-nay on the attle-bay, which apparently had too much of a China-containment knuckledragger vibe.

ASB was formally retired and replaced with the more benign-sounding Joint Concept for Access and Maneuver in the Global Commons (JAM-GC pronounced: Jam, Gee-Cee). Perhaps "Concept" was omitted from the acronym because it diluted the resolve embodied in the term "JAM".

Scenarios for wars with China have been played in countless publications. One of the most gripping depictions of a scuffle over Taiwan was provided by Popular Mechanics:

The 20 remaining missiles re-enter the atmosphere over Okinawa. Kadena's Patriot batteries fire missiles in response, but they are off-network and in disarray—10 missiles are struck by multiple interceptors, but an equal number slip through the defensive screen and hit Kadena. Some of the GPS-guided warheads contain bomblets that crater the base's two runways. Others air-burst over the base, devastating barracks, radar arrays and hangars. Kadena is far from destroyed, but until its runways can be repaired, it is out of the fight. The F-15s on the way to Taiwan must bank for Guam, 1300 miles southeast—they have the range to reach the base there, but only Kadena is close enough to stage efficient combat patrols. Also, F-22 stealth fighters based at Hickam Air Force Base, Hawaii, now cannot land on the base's shattered runways and reinforce the F-15s. With Kadena's satellites gone, the Nimitz and its flotilla of eight escorts, including Aegis-guided missile destroyers and a pair of submarines, are steaming toward an enemy possessing one of the world's largest submarine fleets and an arsenal of land-, air- and sea-launched antiship missiles.

About 8 hours after the mass raid on Taiwan, klaxons start blaring aboard the Nimitz and her escorts. There are more missiles in the air, this time headed straight for the carrier group. The Taiwan Strait is still more than 1000 miles away, but the war has come to the Nimitz. Skimming the surface of the Pacific are four supersonic missiles flying faster than their own roar.

Yowza. PM actually offered a twofer of competing scenarios. It is a bit disconcerting that the US loses in one scenario and is only able to prevail in the second thanks to some experimental missile defense Wunderwaffe imported from the Nevada Test and Training Range for the occasion.

There's a problem with these scenarios. They're both bullsh*t.

The image of the Nimitz bravely chugging through the global commons amid a hail of PLA munitions while the Pentagon anxiously flings missile defense assets at the problem is not a central part of the US scenario.

The precise character of what the US plans to do under JAM-GC is classified, but in addition to "joint accessing the global commons", it involves offensive operations outside "the global commons" i.e. inside the PRC mainland. Massive operations. A core element of the US scenario for a war over Taiwan is the United States dishing it out on with attacks on PRC missile, airforce, and command & control facilities deep in the mainland, some of which are located around Chinese cities.

US strategic doctrine is "never cross swords with a nuclear power" and we haven't to date, not even with North Korea, and for good reason.

Reportedly war games for many of these scenarios start out as conventional exchanges and end up nuclear because of the intense offensive operations needed to degrade the PRC's burgeoning military capability—a contingency AirSea Battle & JAM-GC planners have tried to evade to an almost laughable degree, I suspect, because it challenges the logic of deterrence through a buildup of conventional forces.

An important RAND study, The U.S.-China Military Scorecard, for instance, provides over 400 pages of conventional warfighting goodness, including chapters on "U.S. Penetration of Chinese Airspace" and "U.S. Capability to Attack Chinese Air Bases". However, the authors take nukes off the table as a matter for JAM-GC because, well, whatever happens in the course of the US campaign against mainland targets, the PRC strategic nuclear strike capability will remain untouched (we're not gonna bomb it! Honest! Trust us!)

The nuclear scorecard evaluates crisis stability in the bilateral nuclear relationship rather than the advantage enjoyed by one side or the other. Specifically, the scorecard examines the survivability of both sides' second-strike capabilities in the face of a first strike by the other. When both sides maintain a survivable second-strike capability, the

incentives for both the stronger and weaker parties to strike first diminish and stability

is, in that sense, enhanced.

...so, even if the PLA is crumbling under US conventional strikes, the Chinese mainland is in flames, Taiwan declares independence, anti-government insurrections break out in Hong Kong, Xinjiang, and Tibet, the Chinese command-and-control structure melts under US cyberattacks, the reign of the red mandarins is headed for the sh*tter, CCP leadership unity implodes, appeasers and dead-enders fight for control of the nuclear button, and commanders slide into the Use It or Lose It mindset, the PRC will certainly drop everything to make sure Mr. Nuke stays in his cage! Fer sure!

I wonder how many people in the Pentagon and the White House are convinced by RAND's advertorial for the "stabilizing" character of conventional war inside China, given the way the war games scenarios reportedly play out. Not many, I think. Anyway, hope.

In my Asia Times piece, I look at this interesting development and opine the attractions of a conventional seven day dubious battle under JAM-GC auspices followed by a nuclear exchange will wane as the PRC continues its military buildout, and that tactical nuclear weapons will be reintroduced into the Asian nuclear equation by the US to preserve US military dominance vis a vis the PRC.

The most likely candidate for an Asian role is the LRSO Long Range Stand Off missile.

The LRSO is the replacement for the elderly/tending towards obsolescence nuclear ALCM (Air Launched Cruise Missile). The ALCM is only launchable by (non-stealthy) B52, is itself non-stealthy, has a limited range and therefore would place itself and its aircraft at risk to those radars and missile defenses the pesky PRC persists in provocatively placing on its perimeter. (Maybe the Pentagon should start calling this the "6P threat". Don't forget to credit China Matters!).

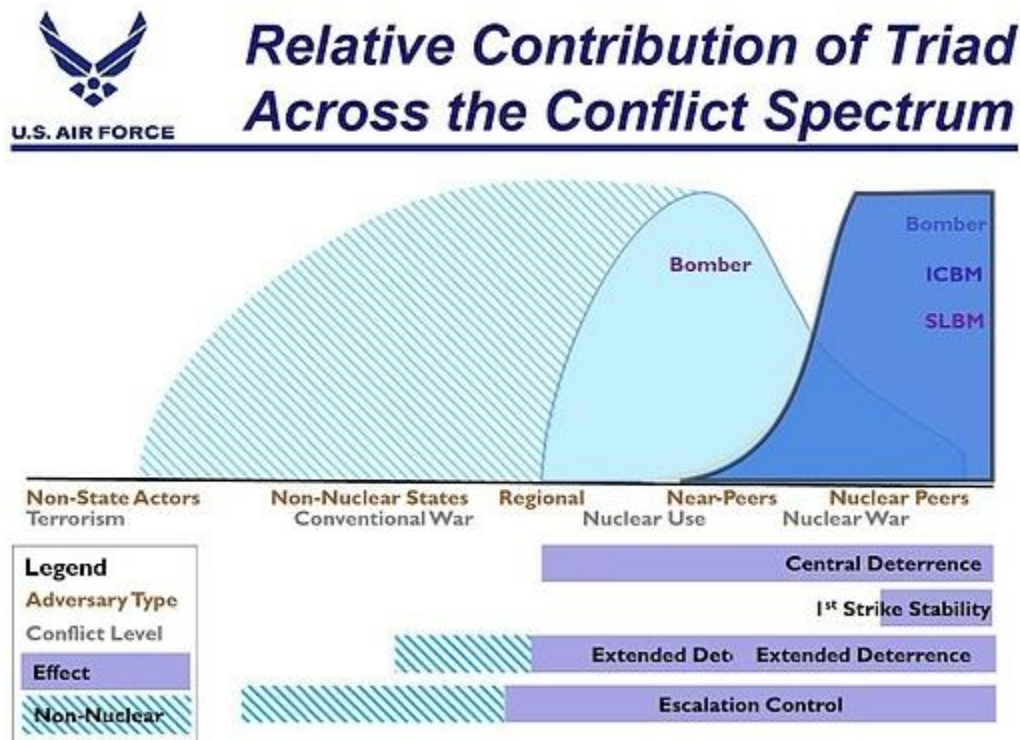
The LRSO is a stealthy nuclear tipped cruise missile with a more extended 3000 km range and will be launchable from the B2 stealth bomber as well as the LRSB, the stealthy Long Range Strike Bomber now on the drawing board.

The LRSO is officially marketed as a strategic weapon but, unsurprisingly, given its dialable yield and stealthiness, apparently has a significant tactical component.

The Federation of American Scientists parsed public statements concerning the LRSO and commented:

It seems clear from many of these statements that the LRSO is not merely a retaliatory capability but very much seen as an offensive nuclear strike weapon that is intended for use in the early phases of a conflict even before long-range ballistic missiles are used. In a briefing from 2014, Major General Garrett Harencak, until September this year the assistant chief of staff for Air Force strategic deterrence and nuclear integration, described a "nuclear use" phase before actual

nuclear war during which bombers would use nuclear weapons against regional and near-peer adversaries.



The staff officer who came up with that new segment of the conflict spectrum between “conventional war” and “nuclear war” and called it “nuclear use” deserves a medal, don’t you think? Like Homer Simpson:

Character 1: “First, the award for the alumnus who’s gained the most weight: Homer Simpson!”
Homer: “Oh my God!” Character 1: “How did you do it, Homer?” Homer: “I discovered a meal between breakfast and brunch.”

For that matter, can anybody think of a “regional/near-peer competitor” that might require the attentions of a nuclear cruise missile during a “nuclear use” activity? Anybody? Anybody? Bueller?

The way I think it’s supposed to work, the LRSO is loaded aboard a B2 bomber in the US, which flies into the middle of the Pacific, stealthily drops the missile (well, maybe 16 missiles) without detection by PRC radars and missile defenses and well outside the dreaded first island chain that is the focus of purported PRC A2/AD intentions, and lumbers home while the missiles (stealthy, probably redirectable, maybe with a supersonic engine) fly into China and “let freedom ring”.

(I, by the way, consider it rather interesting that the PRC does not use the term A2/AD, which is the Pentagon term of art for “PRC wants to deny us access to our rightful waters”; they call it fan jieru 反介入 i.e. “anti-intrusion” with a homeland-protection inference, which pivoteers prefer to

translate as “anti-intervention”, which has more of an “interfering with Taiwan invasion” vibe to my ear).

Lot of advantages to US military planners to this scenario.

First off, each LRSO W80-4 warhead will have a dialable yield between 5 and 150 kilotons. There will be 500+ of these warheads if the Pentagon has its way (otherwise, there would be no operational home for the warheads coming off the ALCMs, and decommissioning those gadgets would be such a waste!). A single B2 with two 8-missile launch pods could probably carry over 2 megatons’ worth of arms which, if I’m doing the math right, is about 150 times the yield of the Hiroshima blast.

Adding up all the available warheads translates into a cumulative 75 megatons of “tactical” nukes, which is really a fresh strategic punch

For perspective, the largest thermonuclear device that ever entered the US arsenal was the Mark 41, with a theoretical yield of 25 megatons and an expected fireball 4 miles in diameter. It would destroy pretty much everything in an 8 mile radius and be able to cause third-degree i.e. major burns 32 miles away.

With all due respect to the conventional forces the US is amassing in the Western Pacific and the legions of analysts beaver away at JAM-GC scenarios, Mr. Nuke, as represented by the LRSO, is more likely to deliver a credible deterrent and confidence in US victory in a confrontation with the PRC.

The LRSO scenario has political/operational advantages as well.

Basing outside the region for delivery by strategic bomber means no problems of nuke-averse allies or, for that matter, risky naval deployments on subs or otherwise.

And, since the missile is stored in the homeland and can probably be rolled out in a conventional as well as nuclear configuration, the PRC talking point that the US is targeting China with a new generation of tactical nuclear weapons can be evaded. Victory!

The LRSO will be ready by 2030 (at the latest; in my AT piece I used the figure 5 years based on what I’d read) and, if the Pentagon has its way, several hundred will be nuclear tipped. The arms control community is in a tizzy at this unambiguously destabilizing innovation, which will probably elicit a host of PRC countermeasures including “Launch on Warning”, MIRVing, and whatnot. It looks like a heated argument is shaping up between the “more is always better” vs. “arms races are bad” crowds.

Count on the “let’s do both!” gang prevailing. i.e. selling the LRSO as a valuable “bargaining chip”.

Because, as I’ve argued frequently, US planners see “heightened tensions” as a vital driver/competitive advantage for the military-heavy US agenda in Asia and a bulwark against

Asian nations wasting their energies by doing something stupid like focusing on regional economic integration and a security architecture that includes China instead of confronting it...

...with the assumption that the costs of any miscalculation will be borne by Asia, and not the US homeland.

Your pivot at work, ladies and gentlemen. Soon to be nuclear.