



Center for Strategic and Budgetary Assessments

STUDIES

Long-Range Strike: Imperatives, Urgency and Options

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Resources: Forces & Capabilities

This report has two main thrusts: first, to articulate the prospective role of long-range strike (LRS) in future US military strategy; and, second, to explore American LRS needs in the mid- to long-term.

With regard to the first aim, the report argues that long-range strike is a core area of US strategic advantage in the current era. The growing ability of accurate, non-nuclear (or “conventional”) munitions to achieve military effects comparable to nuclear weapons, without the collateral damage of nuclear employment, means that conventional LRS can be used for more than deterrence, which was the overriding goal of American and Soviet long-range, offensive forces during the Cold War.

Currently, however, American LRS capabilities are largely in the hands of a single military service, the US Air Force, and the evidence argues that the institutional Air Force is neither taking—nor planning to take—the near-term steps to ensure that the United States will have the long-range strike capabilities the country will need in the mid- to long-term. Hence, the principal implication of this report is that decisions and actions to move ahead in LRS—to maintain a position of substantial American military advantage—should be undertaken sooner rather than later, meaning within the next 5-10 years.

The heart of the argument for this conclusion lies in the strategic opportunities likely to be foregone, and challenges unmet, if greater priority and urgency are not accorded to LRS. The most important opportunity likely to be foregone is failing to maintain America's early lead in precision strike by building a robust capability to hold enemy targets at risk with accurate, conventional munitions at global distances. A crucial challenge likely to be unmet is neglecting to hedge against the rise of Asian powers and the spread of nuclear weapons. Other lost opportunities and unmet challenges include: reducing American reliance on nuclear weapons, denying prospective enemies sanctuaries, shaping their investments by forcing them to spend more on defending against American LRS capabilities, and closing capability gaps—preeminently the ability to prosecute emergent and time-sensitive targets deep inside defended airspace. These issues provide the strategic rationale for moving ahead promptly in LRS and are the focus of the second chapter of this report.

To be as clear as possible, the conclusion that it is urgent to begin developing a future LRS system in the near-term should not be construed as a call to neglect or jettison short-range strike. The issue is one of regaining more balance between long-range and short-range strike rather than betting everything—or nearly everything—on one or the other. The spending imbalance discussed at the end of the first chapter documents just how heavily Defense Department investments in precision strike are weighted in favor of short-range.