

# US prepares to put nuclear bombers on 24-hour alert

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Amid a deepening standoff with North Korea and rising tensions with Russia and China, the United States is preparing to place its fleet of nuclear-capable B-52 bombers on 24-hour alert for the first time since 1991.

“This is yet one more step in ensuring that we’re prepared,” Gen. David Goldfein, Air Force chief of staff, told *Defense One* in an exclusive interview.

During the Cold War, the US Air Force Strategic Air Command maintained a series of so-called “Christmas tree” alert areas at bases throughout the United States in which B-52 nuclear-capable heavy bombers would be stationed in a permanent state of readiness, with crew accommodations on site.

Touring Barksdale Air Force Base in Louisiana, Goldfein made clear that such facilities, mothballed since the end of the Cold War, were being renovated.

“Already, various improvements have been made to prepare Barksdale,” reported *Defense One* “to return B-52s to an alert posture. Near the alert pads, an old concrete building—where B-52 crews during the Cold War would sleep, ready to run to their aircraft and take off at a moment’s notice—is being renovated. Inside, beds are being installed for more than 100 crew members, more than enough room for the crews that would man bombers positioned on the nine alert pads outside.”

*Defense One* noted that “Goldfein and other senior defense officials stressed that the alert order had not been given, but that preparations were under way in anticipation that it might come.”

Responding to *Defense One*’s story, the Air Force issued a “denial” consisting merely of a reassertion that such an order had not been issued. The Air Force did not specifically deny the allegation that facilities that are only useful for 24-hour readiness were being renovated.

In many ways, Goldfein’s statements raise more questions than answers. B-52 bombers are huge, slow and vulnerable to the advanced anti-aircraft missiles deployed by Russia, China and their allies. During the Cold War, these bombers were maintained on permanent alert to respond massively to an unforeseen launch of nuclear weapons. The “Christmas trees” were designed to allow the bombers to launch as quickly as possible once nuclear weapons were already in the air. By the time they had gotten a fraction of the way to their targets, one or more volleys of nuclear ICBMs, which reach their destination in under an hour, would have already been launched and detonated, leaving dozens of major cities in ashes.

The most straightforward interpretation of Goldfein’s remarks is that the United States is preparing for a world in which a full-scale thermonuclear exchange with either Russia or China, the only nations with nuclear arsenals whose size could possibly warrant such a build-up, can take place at the drop of a hat: in response to an accidental exchange of fire during a border stand-off or at the late-night whim of the notoriously impulsive President Trump.

Along those lines, Goldfein told *Defense One*, “I look at it more as not planning for any specific event, but more for the reality of the global situation we find ourselves in.”

But there are other questions. Given the quick “retraction” by the Air Force, did the Joint Chiefs of Staff authorize Goldfein to discuss the plans? If the Air Force is not planning to return to 24-hour readiness, who authorized the renovations, whose existence the Air Force did not deny?

In this light, it is worth noting the involvement of Barksdale Air Force Base in a still-unexplained incident in August 2007, when a B-52 “accidentally”

flew to the base from Minot Air Force Base in North Dakota armed with six AGM-86 cruise missiles, each loaded with a W80 nuclear warhead. The incident led to the resignations of multiple high-ranking Air Force officers, including Air Force Secretary Michael Wynne and Air Force Chief of Staff Michael Moseley.

In this regard, Goldfein's further comments are chilling. *Defense One* reports he is "asking his force to think about new ways that nuclear weapons could be used for deterrence, or even combat." In other words, the head of the Air Force is taking his own initiative to push for the combat use of nuclear weapons for the first time since the bombing of Hiroshima and Nagasaki, and making preparations for the deployment of new weapons systems ahead of the decision to actually field them.

In this regard, the aggressive development of US nuclear forces being pushed by Goldfein dovetails with the positions advanced by President Trump in fractious debates with members of his cabinet and military officials about the future of the US nuclear arsenal. In the notorious July 20 Pentagon meeting after which Secretary of State Rex Tillerson called Trump a "moron," the president called for a tenfold increase in the number of US nuclear weapons, a move that would place the United States in flagrant violation of numerous treaties.

Trump's bluster about expanding the US nuclear weapons arsenal marks, albeit in his own crude way, a continuation of the policies pursued under Obama, who helped set in motion a massive, \$1 trillion plan to modernize Washington's nuclear arsenal through the commissioning of a new class of nuclear-armed ballistic missile submarines, a new type of ICBM and the creation of a new nuclear-armed cruise missile.

The revelation that the Air Force is preparing to place strategic bombers in a permanent state of readiness comes amid a continuation of US provocations against North Korea, as well as Russia and China.

On the heels of last week's joint military exercise between the US and South Korean navies, the US has announced that it will imminently test plans for evacuating personnel from South Korea in anticipation of a possible war.

Reporting from an aircraft carrier engaged in the exercises, ABC's Martha Raddatz noted on Sunday's "This Week" program, "The Sea of Japan is bristling

with warships." Concluding the segment, Raddatz declared that the sailors "have to be ready to fight tonight."

NATO, meanwhile, is simultaneously beefing up its presence in Eastern Europe in preparation for a conflict with Russia. Writing about the contents of an internal NATO white paper calling for a further expansion of NATO's military forces, Germany's *Der Spiegel* reported, "The period of the so-called 'peace dividend'—a term referring to the years following 1989 when Western countries felt they no longer needed to spend as much money on their defensive capabilities—is over and Cold War command structures have returned. Once again, NATO should be prepared for a large military conflict."

Seen in this context, the US Air force is preparing for such a "major war" to go nuclear.



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