



STRATEGIC EFFECTS OF NUCLEAR OPERATIONS

Last Updated: 18 December 2020

Air Force nuclear forces consist of delivery systems; [nuclear command, control, and communications](#) (NC3) capabilities; personnel; and the physical infrastructure for sustainment. Intercontinental ballistic missiles (ICBMs) and dual-capable bombers and fighters are the Air Force’s delivery platforms. Each Air Force nuclear-capable system offers distinct advantages. ICBMs are the most responsive, offering prompt, on-alert capability combined with dispersed fielding. Dual-capable aircraft offer mission flexibility and capabilities to provide distinct signaling in a crisis through alert posturing and shows of force.

[Deterrence](#), [extended deterrence](#), [assurance](#), [dissuasion](#), and [defeat](#) stem from the credibility of our nuclear capabilities in the minds of those we seek to deter, assure, dissuade, or defeat. This credibility is communicated through messaging opportunities such as weapon system testing, nuclear exercises, alert posturing, and shows of force.

Deterrence, assurance, and dissuasion may be implemented independently or in conjunction with operations at any point across the range of military operations throughout the [competition continuum](#). Although deterrence activities are more typically envisioned as occurring during shaping or deter activities within the [joint operation model](#), deterrence

may actually occur during any activities across the joint operation model. Influencing an adversary’s risk-benefit calculus to reduce their available options, a form of escalation

Shows of Force

A show of force is defined as “**an operation planned to demonstrate US resolve that involves increased visibility of US deployed forces in an attempt to defuse a specific situation that, if allowed to continue, may be detrimental to US interests or national objectives**” (JP 3-0, [Joint Operations](#)).

Shows of force are frequently used to deter adversaries and assure allies and partners, frequently in the same stroke. The deployment of an additional number of bombers or fighters to a tense region is an example using Air Force capabilities.

control, can take place while other operations (including other nuclear and non-nuclear operations) are ongoing.

“The Air Force sent groups of B-52s to the Pacific and Europe as bomber task force deployments within two days this week, prompting Russia to intercept one.

On June 15, two B-52Hs from the 5th Bomb Wing at Minot Air Force Base, ND, flew a long-distance strategic Bomber Task Force mission through Europe and the Baltics, where they participated in the NATO-led Baltic Operations [BALTOPS] exercise...

“Long-range strategic bomber missions to the Baltic region are a visible demonstration of our capability to extend deterrence globally,” [US Air Forces Europe] boss Gen. Jeffrey Harrigian said in the release. “Our participation in BALTOPS also provides an opportunity for us to strengthen relationships with our NATO allies and partners while operating in the air and sea domains....”

“The deployments are the latest in the Air Force’s dynamic force employment model of sending bombers abroad, following the end of the Service’s continuous bomber presence in the Pacific.

Instead of long-term deployments, the Service is currently focusing on sending small groups of bombers on short-notice flights across the globe to be more unpredictable.”

-- [“B-52 Task Forces Head to Eastern Europe, Alaska”](#)
Air Force Magazine, 15 June 2020

For additional discussion on deterrence, assurance, and dissuasion, see also [“Practical Design: The Coercion Continuum”](#) in AFDP 3-0, [Operations and Planning](#).
