

What Would Putting Nuclear B-52s On 24-hr. Alert Mean?

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The U.S. Air Force is vehemently denying that there are any plans or preparations underway to put the nuclear-capable B-52 bomber back on 24-hour alert, a status not seen since the end of the Cold War.

What the Air Force is actually doing, they say, is renovating base infrastructure at Barksdale AFB, Louisiana, where the crew members that operate the bombers would eat and sleep if the service were to resume that 24-hr. alert status.

The renovations include electrical and mechanical system upgrades, for instance HVAC systems, as well as infrastructure upgrades like new plumbing, briefing rooms, stair handrails, exterior fencing, and some “quality of life” upgrades such as lodging, furniture and kitchen upgrades, according to an Air Force spokesperson.

Barksdale is Home to the 2nd Bomb Wing and Air Force Global Strike Command.

Air Force spokeswoman Ann Stefanek stressed that these renovations are routine.

“Preparations like updating base infrastructure (ex. Updating alert facilities, munitions storage, dining facilities), conducting exercises, and modernizing equipment are necessary to maintain a baseline level of readiness,” Stefanek said.

“We do this routinely as part of our organize, train and equip mission so our forces are ready to respond when called upon.”

Still, the upgrades cannot be ignored as President Donald Trump and North Korea’s leader Kim Jong-Un trade threats of war over Pyongyang’s nuclear weapons program.

So what would returning the B-52s to 24-hr. alert status actually mean? Up until 1991, the Air Force had B-52s sitting on the runway at Global Strike bases across the country. Pilots would take turns doing 24-hr. shifts in alert facilities, where they would eat, sleep and plan for a conflict, said Brig. Gen. Ed Thomas, an Air Force spokesman.

"They had beds, kitchens, living rooms. They left their homes and their families and they went for 24 hours or more in these alert facilities, and then they exercised and planned for the real-world [scenario]," Thomas said. "Remember in 'Dr. Strangelove' that klaxon sound, and the pilots are literally grabbing their gear and they are running out to an aircraft for a quick start ... to be able to strike a target somewhere in the world? That was the alert mission that we had until 1991."

The 24-hr. alert mission went away after the end of the Cold War. The Air Force today maintains a continuous rotation of three types of bombers—nuclear-armed B-2s and B-52s, as well as non-nuclear B-1s—at Anderson AFB, Guam, providing rapid global strike capability in the Pacific region.

The Air Force does keep some fighters on around-the-clock alert across the country, for instance the air superiority F-22 Raptors at Joint Base Elmendorf-Richardson, Alaska.

"Those F-22s sit alert in those facilities... where the crews are living and sleeping and they regularly exercise just like they did during the Cold War," Thomas said.

A return to 24-hr. alert status for the nuclear B-52s in for the first time since the Cold War would send a strong signal to allies and adversaries that the U.S. is serious, said Todd Harrison of the Center for Strategic and International Studies.

"Since we haven't done that since the Cold War, that in itself is a signal, a signal that our adversaries and allies around the world would be able to see," Harrison said. "So it's a way of ratcheting up pressure and showing we're serious."

So how ready are the B-52s today to respond to a crisis, on the Korean Peninsula or elsewhere?

"Could they do it, or would we be ready for them? Absolutely. Could we do the mission? We could stand that up very quickly," Thomas said. "We prepare for every contingency."

The Air Force's statements came in response to an Oct. 22 story from Defense One, which reported that the service is preparing to return the B-52s to 24-hr. alert status.