

By John T. Correll, Editor in Chief

Deep Strike

IN FEBRUARY, seeking to break free of a politically sticky question about future production of B-2 bombers, the White House announced that the Pentagon would expand an on-going study of deep attack capabilities to include the trade-offs between long-range bombers, landbased and seabased tactical aircraft, and missiles. A spokesman for the Department of Defense said that completion of the expanded study is expected in early 1997.

This analysis is to be conducted by Dr. Paul G. Kaminski, the under secretary of Defense for Acquisition and Technology. He and his team do not begin from scratch. The question has been studied before, and the findings are substantial.

The dominant requirement for deep attack in a major regional conflict is to strike the enemy's centers of gravity and to do it rapidly, accurately, and with intensity. (Centers of gravity, in the parlance of modern strategy, are those critical points in the opponent's order of battle and infrastructure against which the use of force has greater effect than if the same force were applied elsewhere. These targets tend to lie deep in enemy territory.)

The objective is to attack these centers of gravity "in parallel"—all of them at once—rather than serially. The capability to do that is new and growing. During World War II, Eighth Air Force struck about fifty target sets in all of 1943. In the Persian Gulf War, the coalition hit 150 targets in the first twenty-four hours. Gen. Ronald R. Fogleman, USAF Chief of Staff, predicts that "very early in the next century, we may be able to engage 1,500 targets within the first hour, if not the first minutes of a conflict."

If the fight is short, the probability of military success is high. The enemy will have no chance to adjust, adapt, or mount a counteroffensive. As an Air Staff briefing officer put it, "With parallel warfare, it all goes down at once. Every step in the recovery tree is obstructed. Even if the decision-maker survives, he can't

know the extent of the damage, can't coordinate a response, can't move repair teams. The enemy is paralyzed."

Obviously, airpower will be paramount. As always, range, payload, and responsiveness are important, but the deep attack mission puts a special premium on penetration of hostile airspace and thus on stealth. The less susceptible an aircraft is to detection by radar, the better it can penetrate and the fewer accompanying aircraft it will need to suppress enemy air defenses. A report done

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last year for the Commission on Roles and Missions said that in the early days of the Gulf War, "one stealth sortie was 'worth' approximately sixteen nonstealth sorties in attack planning."

Precision is likewise crucial because that is what makes the new efficiency of the attack—and hence parallel warfare—possible. Deep strike further requires the capability to generate and sustain sorties and to maintain a high rate of attack, both to cover the target sets and to keep the enemy from bouncing back.

Almost any weapon that reaches beyond the local battlefield has some value against the enemy's rear echelons, but certain forms of military power contribute more than others to the deep strike mission. Land-attack cruise missiles have the range and accuracy to hit distant targets. They can be sent into lethal airspace without risking the lives of aircrews. While

cruise missiles will be the weapons of choice in some instances, they come with drawbacks that include high cost, relatively small payload, and less accuracy than cheaper missiles fired from aircraft.

As for carrier-based airpower, it is at its best when the targets are within air reach of safe waters and when a limited amount of force is sufficient. It can work effectively along with forward-based and long-range airpower to establish a US military presence or to respond to the initial phases of a regional crisis.

A huge problem for the Navy in the deep strike mission, however, is that it has no stealth aircraft and does not figure to have any until it gets the Joint Strike Fighter in about fifteen years. Pumping out sorties for sustained conflict is not the long suit of naval airpower, either. A report by the Center for Naval Analyses and RAND Corp., for example, found that carrier aviation produced seventeen percent fewer sorties per aircraft than landbased aircraft in the Gulf War.

For sheer payload brought to bear with precision against enemy centers of gravity, nothing beats the long-range bomber in the deep attack role. The B-2, cued by a signal from space, for example, will be able to target sixteen aimpoints independently on a single pass. The only operational stealth aircraft in the world are the Air Force's F-117s and B-2s.

USAF's commitment to precision attack capabilities has grown since the Gulf War. The number of its aircraft outfitted to deliver precision guided weapons has tripled in the past five years, and the weapons are getting better. Many of the targets in the enemy's heartland would fall to Air Force ground-attack aircraft operating from forward locations.

What Dr. Kaminski and his colleagues are likely to find is that bombers, various forms of tactical airpower, and missiles all contribute to the task at hand—but that all in all, the deep attack mission is a remarkable match with the strengths of landbased airpower and of the US Air Force. ■